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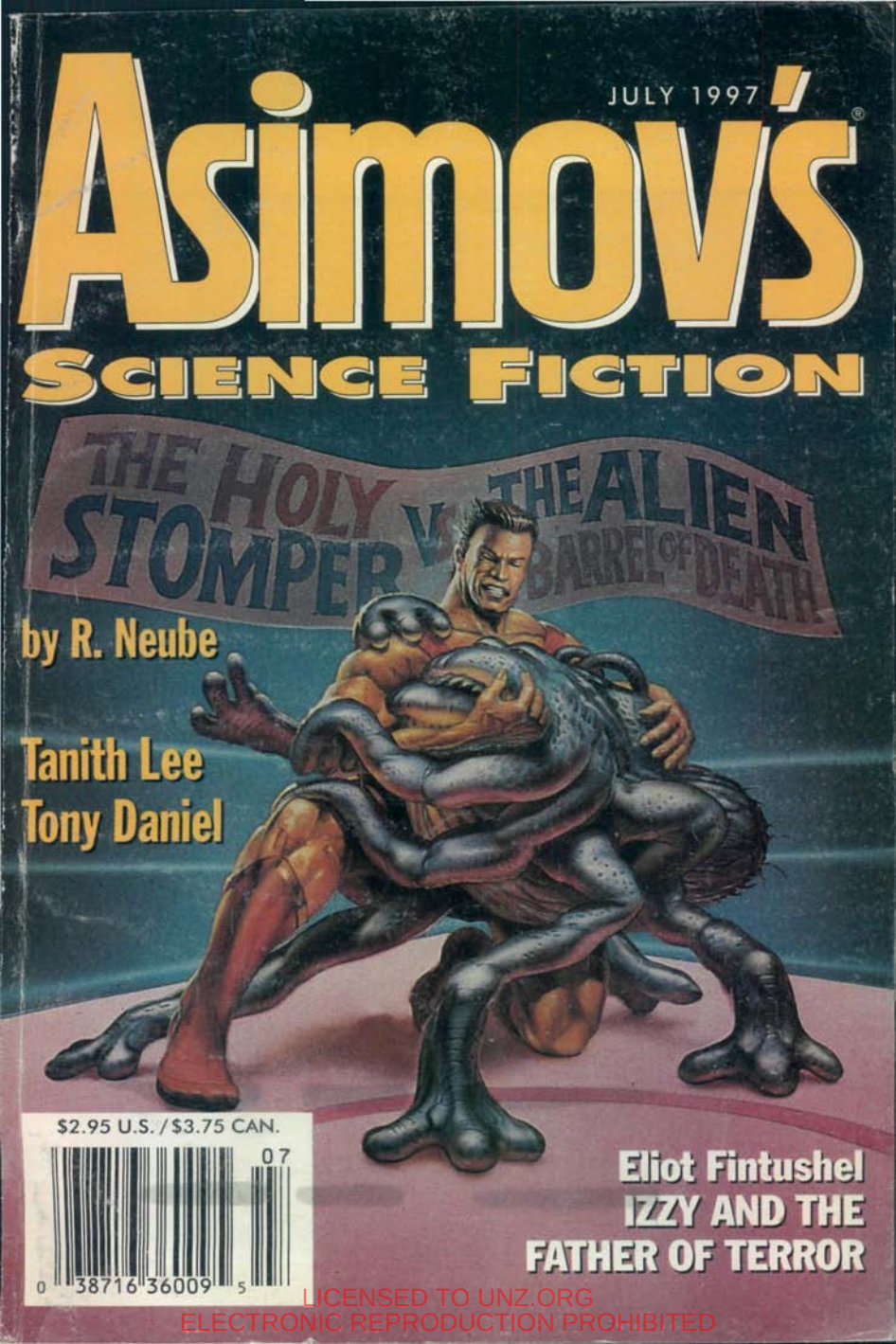

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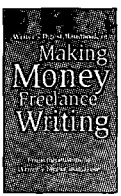

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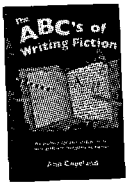

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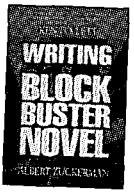

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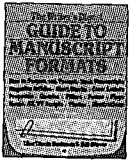

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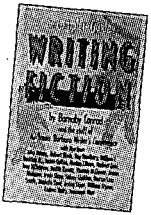

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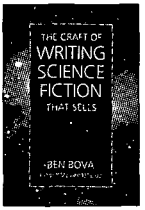

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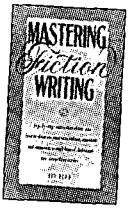

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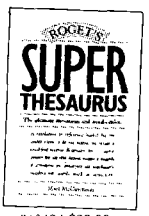

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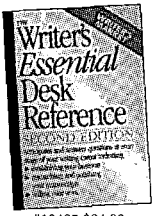

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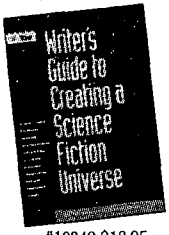

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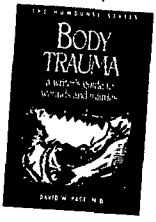

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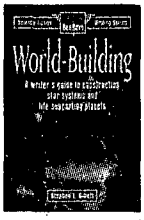

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

MY NEW SOFTWARE

Isaac Asimov wouldn't set foot aboard an airplane. Ray Bradbury doesn't drive. Harlan Ellison writes his stories on a manual typewriter.

I don't share any of those quirks. I've flown at least five hundred times in the last forty years; I know how to drive, and do; I've used a computer for my writing since 1982. Where my technological limitations cut in is at the Internet revolution. I don't do E-mail. (Not yet, anyway.) I don't have a web site, and I don't visit other people's sites. I don't even own a modem. All of these things are subject to change, perhaps even before this column gets into print, but at the moment I've managed successfully to resist the whole thing. Which is, you might say, a reactionary point of view. I concede the point. While all of you were out shopping for new surfing software last week, I bought myself an 1853 edition of *Roget's Thesaurus,* in a splendid leather binding. Is that not a reactionary thing for a sci-fi guy like me to be doing?

I've had a thesaurus or two since I began writing, of course. My working vocabulary is an unusually well stocked one, the product of an old-fashioned education and close to sixty years of omnivorous reading, but I can't always come up with the precise word or shade of meaning I want to use, and I found long ago that it was a lot more efficient to turn to Roget for what I'm looking for than to sit at the typewriter cudgeling my brains for the *mot juste.* (Of course, I don't sit at a typewriter any longer, but you know what I mean. And if anything the switch to a computer has led me to even greater thesaurus use, because now I have the lovely "search" facility to tell me instantly whether I'm overworking a word. I don't want my protagonist to be startled three times on the same page, when he could be astonished, surprised, aghast, breathless, agape, open-mouthed, thunderstruck, spellbound, or lost in amazement or wonder instead. Hence the thesaurus.) (The word itself is derived from the Greek for "treasury" or "storehouse.")

I bought my first thesaurus in the summer of 1946. It's a twenty-five-cent paperback—that's what they cost in those days—published by Pocket Books. At that time Pocket Books kept count of each copy sold and displayed the number on the cover of each book, the way signs at McDonald's display the cumulative total of burgers sold. My thesaurus is Pocket Book No. 150,008,743. It's a reprint of

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the 1923 edition of *Roget's International Thesaurus,* and it served me nobly and well for many years.

Somewhere along the way—1964, I think—I picked up a later edition—"Revised, Greatly Enlarged." This is the one that G.P. Putnam's Sons published in 1959. Not only does it include a good many words, both colloquial and formal, that aren't in the earlier edition, but its method of arrangement is somewhat more streamlined than that of the 1923 book, and it is this larger and more efficient thesaurus that I've used most of the time in my writing career. I haven't felt the need for a newer one, or one to go on my computer, or anything like that.

But suddenly, a few weeks ago, I developed a craving for a really *old* thesaurus—one that wasn't in any way streamlined, but in fact was full of quaint, obsolete, even moldy words that only a pedant would use today. Did a little sniffing around, finally located one (via fax!) that a Minnesota bookseller happened to have. It's the second edition, 1853, described on the title page as "Revised and Enlarged," of *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases,* published in London by Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans. And a grand and lovely thing it is.

Peter Mark Roget, the man who gave us the thesaurus, has had his name become a household word, of sorts, but the man himself has vanished from our knowledge. The 1853 title page tells us that he was a Fellow of the Royal College of

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Physicians, a member of the Senate of the University of London, and a member also of various literary and philosophical societies of Manchester, Liverpool, Quebec, New York, Stockholm, etc. We are also informed that he was the author of the "Bridgewater Treatise on Animal and Vegetable Physiology." My 1968 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—which is getting to be a quaint old item itself, these days—tells me that he was born in London in 1779, studied medicine at Edinburgh, and was a practicing physician from 1808 to 1840, during which period he also found time to lecture and write on many scientific topics and to invent a slide rule. (Cf. under "quaint scientific instruments of the past.")

From his sixty-first to his seventy-third years Roget amused himself in retirement from his medical practice by compiling a list of synonyms and other verbal equivalents "to facilitate the expression of ideas and to assist in literary composition." The first edition appeared in 1852, and an expanded and rearranged version—the one I have—the following year. From then until his death at 90 in 1869, Roget continued to work on a further expansion of the book, which his son brought out in 1879. The next edition was the product of Roget's grandson; the one after that (my 1923 book) was edited by C.O. Sylvester Mawson and Katharine Aldrich Whiting; the 1959 one was the work of Norman Lewis, who based it on Mawson-Whiting. Very likely there have been several editions since, though I haven't felt the need for them.

So much for the history of the book. What are the special merits of the gorgeous leather-bound Second Edition that now sits on my desk?

It's a wondrous tool for orchestrating one's prose, is what it is. It's full of all manner of highly ornamental, not to say bombastic, words that a writer can bring into play for special effects. Why, just consider the synonyms for the word "diffuse," a concept that brings warmth to the heart of any long-winded writer of hefty multivolume novels:

"Wordy, verbose, prolix, copious, exuberant, flowing, bombastic, lengthy, long-winded, longsome, spun out, long-spun, loose, lax, washy, slipslop, frothy, flatulent, digressive, discursive, excursive, tripping, rambling, ambagious, pleonastic, periphrastic, episodic."

Some of these, to be sure, are in my later editions. But—washy? Slipslop? Longsome? *Ambagious?* I have none of these words in my active working vocabulary. But the next time I need to describe a character who is given to beating about the bush, watch me reach for "ambagious" or "periphrastic," to provide that extra little touch of high-toned bombast.

Or take a simple concept like "roughness." My fine old paperback of the 1923 text provides a mere duo of synonyms: "asperity" and "corrugation." They are both

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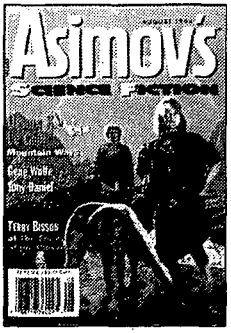

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in the 1853 book; but look at this additional trove of verbal treasure:

"Unevenness, rugosity, ruggedness, scabrousness, salebrosity, scragginess, cragginess, craggedness, nodosity, crispness."

Salebrosity! I can surely find some use for that. Scragginess, cragginess, and craggedness—sounds like a Dickensian law firm! And rugosity! I will never forget how H.P. Lovecraft's gigantic and *rugose* aliens shambled through the nightmares of my boyhood, and here is the very word, both noun and adjective.

Just below, we have some spectacularly archaic synonyms for the simple verb "to fold." How I revel in them! Rimple! Crankle! Crimple! Rivel! (And also "plicate," a word known to me from my horticultural studies, but not widely used by me in my fiction. . . . Not yet, anyway.)

And you there, O reader of science fiction and fantasy. Does the thought of stumbling across all this periphrastic ambagiousness in *Pedants of Majipoor* cause agitation in your soul? That is to say, does it create succussions or jactitations in you? Tumultuation? Feelings of subsultation? Or does it simply excite you? (Affect, touch, move, stir, suscitate. . . .)

Somebody, long ago, divided writers into putters-in and takers-out. James Joyce and William Faulkner and H.P. Lovecraft were exuberant putters-in, whose works favored glorious verbal sprawl;

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Ernest Hemingway and Robert A. Heinlein and James Blish were ruthless takers-out, whose styles were precise and taut. I have been both in my time; some of my books, especially the early ones, run heavily to lucidity and clarity, but in recent years I have, now and then, indulged in a certain flamboyant ambagiousness of style (as I have this very day learned to describe it).

The devout takers-out, I suppose, would need an anti-thesaurus to help them achieve ever greater effects of leanness in their prose; but I ask you to think of the joy that the dedicated putter-in feels when a reference book offers him, as words that carry the meaning of "active antagonism," such marvels as "preclusion," "impedition," "retardment," "oppilation," and "coarctation." Such a wealth! (How jolly to use them all in the same sentence!) One can not merely *impede* the advance of the villain's army, one can *antevert* it, one can *obviate* it, one can *interclude* it. And I surely will, the very next time I get a good battle raging. (I had some pretty dissilient and escharotic ones in my most recent Majipoor novel, but I hadn't yet acquired my new vocabulary-enhancing software. Watch me next time.)

I wish my Majipooran sorcerers, too, had known about catoptromancy, which is the art of divination by mirrors, and ceromancy, which uses melted wax dropped into water, and sciomancy, the art of divining by shadows. How useful my mages would have found them in the doing of their ominations, premonstrations, vaticinations, and other propiscient tasks. (Roget gives us a whole page of these things. Fantasy novelists take note!)

It's a marvelously rich language we have. You might almost call it supervacaneous in its plenitude of verbal bounty. My lovely old thesaurus reminds one not only of the abundance of that bounty, but of how many of its myriad words have fallen by the wayside over the years. I think it might be fun to pick a few up, dust them off, and set them moving again. ●

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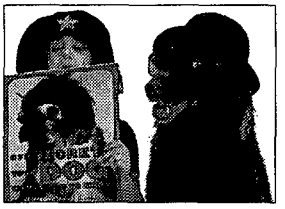

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THE 1997 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

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Isaac Asimov Award: Melissa Garber, Rick Wilber, Sheila Williams, and David Kirtley

Sunny Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, was once again the spot where the annual Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Story Writing was bestowed. This year's winner, David Kirtley, is a freshman majoring in government and minoring in computer science and creative writing at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsors the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew the author in from Maine in March for an all-expense-paid weekend at the annual Conference on the Fantastic.

Although he is only nineteen, David's award-winning tale, "Lest We Forget," is far from his first. The author has been writing stories since he was three years old. In 1995, he received a Scholastic Gold Medal Award for his science fiction story, "Recreational Suicide." While that tale was read before the Library of Congress, David found himself faced with an equally daunting task

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at the Ft. Lauderdale Conference. He gave a commendable reading of his award-winning story directly on the heels of a reading by Daniel Keyes—the renowned author of "Flowers for Algernon"—and Suzy McKee Charnas—the distinguished author of "Beauty and the Opéra or the Phantom Beast" (*Asimov's*, March 1996).

The Asimov Award winner, and the award's other finalists, were chosen by Gardner Dozois, myself, and IAFA Award Administrator Rick Wilber. Rick, David, and I were joined by our second runner-up Melissa Garber at IAFA's award banquet on Saturday, March 22. After dinner, I presented David with an award certificate and a check for $500 from the magazine. Melissa, an English major at Rutgers University, also received a certificate and a one-year subscription to *Asimov's* for her story, "The Hidden One."

The first runner-up for this year's award was Jerry W. Hughes, Jr., of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mr. Hughes received a two-year subscription to *Asimov's* for his tale "Paschen's Story." Third runner-up went to . . . David Kirtley! David received a one-year extension on his current *Asimov's* subscription for "I Think Therefore. . . ?"—his second award-winning story of the night.

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all artforms, disciplines, and media. The award is also supported by the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

We are now actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions to the contest is December 15, 1997. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please remove your name from the manuscript.

Before entering the contest, please contact Award Administrator Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

Asimov Award
School of Mass Communications
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Next year's winner will be announced at the 1998 Conference on the Fantastic and in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

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LETTERS

Dear folks at *Asimov's*,

Awhile back I promised to conduct a survey of young science fiction fans (in my letter concerning Mr. Silverberg's column). At long last, I have the results of that survey for you.

I received a lot of mail concerning my survey. The ages ranging from fifty-two (the young at heart) to thirteen (and one mother of a ten-year-old girl). I don't know if this is important, but the average age of the respondents (all together) was twenty-five. The average age of the respondents under the age of eighteen was fourteen. The average age of respondents over eighteen was forty-five.

Among science fiction and fantasy fans under the age of eighteen the most popular author was (drumroll please!) Isaac Asimov. Asimov was followed closely by Larry Niven and Robert A. Heinlein. Following those two in popularity were Bruce Sterling, Robert Jordan, Piers Anthony and Arthur C. Clarke. A lot of authors were only mentioned once. They were: Mickey Zucker Reichert, David Eddings, Jerry Pournelle, Stephen Barnes, Frank Herbert, Kurt Vonnegut, Tracy Hickman, Margaret Weis, William Gibson, Stephen R. Donaldson, Orson Scott Card, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Maureen McHugh, Phil Dick, Rudy Rucker, Anne McCaffrey, and Douglas Adams.

I determined each author's popularity by how many people mentioned them in their letters to me. Although Asimov was the most popular, more of Heinlein's books were mentioned than Asimov's. So many different books were mentioned that it is impossible to say what the favorite book or style of young fans is. But Asimov's robot books (*I, Robot; The Caves of Steel*) and the Heinlein juveniles (*Have Space Suit Will Travel, Red Planet,* etc.) were mentioned quite often. But many others were mentioned as well. Here is the list of the other books (besides the robot books and Heinlein juveniles): *Ringworld; Neuromancer; Schismatrix; Transreal; Martian Timeslip; Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?; The Island of Dr. Moreau; Blood Music; China Mountain Zhang; Half the Day is Night; I, Robot, the illustrated screenplay; The Martian Chronicles; Fahrenheit 451; Childhood's End; Green Hills of Earth; Number of the Beast; The Integral Trees; Virtual Mode; Fractal Mode; Chaos Mode; Oath of Fealty; The Practice Effect; Cat's Cradle; Dune; Ender's Game;* and the Dragon Lance series. Many other series were mentioned as

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well. They were the Pern books, the Foundation books, the Rama books, *The Lord of the Rings* (including *The Hobbit*), the Thomas Covenant trilogy, the Wheel of Time series, and the Hitchhiker's Guide trilogy (all five books).

There were many different opinions. Some younger fans preferred hard SF, while others preferred the lighter stuff. Many people loved Star Trek and Star Wars while many others hated them. But all of the people who mentioned Star Trek and Star Wars, agreed that the novels based on them (in a word) suck. Some enjoy role-playing, but said that they enjoyed other things (like books) as well. Others said they had no interest in role-playing games. The few people who mentioned Magic (and other card games) said they (the games) were dull. The opinions on books were just as varied. Some loved *Stranger in a Strange Land,* while others found it either too low or disturbing. Some loved *Dune,* but others found it to be a bit long.

One of the respondents (actually, he was a little old to be a respondent, twenty-four) thought it might be a good idea to ask how young fans got introduced to SF magazines (like *Asimov's* or *Analog*). I thought that was a wonderful idea, so I asked all the respondents this. There were many answers. Some were introduced by their parents. One found out about them in an author's autobiography. Another found them at a magazine-sale fund-raiser. Another found a stash of them in his attic. But everyone agreed that the magazines were very hard to find. Anywhere. A few mentioned (please don't take offense here) that maybe there would be more youth interested in SF if they could find these magazines more easily (just a friendly suggestion).

Anyway, I suspect that by this point you guys are pretty tired of this. But if I can ask a favor, if you do publish these results (in the letters page or wherever) can I ask you to say something giving my deepest thanks to all the people who replied to my survey (the young for their help, and the older for their support and encouragement), and my deepest apologies to the people I was unable to send thank you notes to. (I lost some letters before I could send those thank you notes off.)

Thanks for your time,

Jessica R. Bestler

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

You are a genius! I've just recently (finally) read *Nightfall*—the novel. Think about it. Would Dr. Asimov have let just anyone piddle around with one of the most famous short stories ever written?

I just read your July "Reflections," and the wonderful letters that followed (so I'm a little behind). Even stranger, to me, than the fact that there are so many young readers out there is the fact that they all mentioned *Stranger in a Strange Land.* Do they all love to read Mr. Heinlein, or does the title just attract teenagers? I know that I felt like a stranger in a

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strange land when I was fifteen. You could have knocked me over with a feather—though. At their age I was still reading *Tarzan of the Apes* and *White Fang*.

Well, just thought I'd tell you what a joy it is to read *Asimov's* each month. Now I have to get back to reading. "Cloud Cuckoo," by the wonderful Charles Sheffield, awaits.

Lance Lusco
Birmingham, AL

Dear Gardner,

Thank you for publishing Daniel Keys Moran's beautiful story "On Sequoia Time" (September 1996).

It was a difficult story for me to read because of its inherent sadness, but so compellingly told that I could not leave it before the end. When the sequoia shattered on the stone surface of the canyon, I felt shattered as well. Then I read Moran's dedication to his grandfather and understood why. My mother, my own sequoia, is in the final stages of Alzheimer's disease.

Set in the context of futile human hostilities, "On Sequoia Time" describes the heartbreaking, inexorable decline of this terrible affliction with agonizing clarity. As science fiction writers and readers, we routinely explore the farthest edges of our physical and psychological universe but tend to forget that some of the most unexplainable, unimaginable of those edges are part of our everyday lives. There are certainly no stranger time travel journeys than those being taken by the victims of Alzheimer's, and few more heartrending than those taken by their families and friends.

Moran is to be commended for writing this beautiful tale, and you for publishing it.

Carol Severance
Hilo, HI

Dear Editors,

Daniel Keys Moran wrote a beautiful and touching prophetic story. It's one of the most powerful short stories I've ever read, and I've been reading SF for over forty-five years. Congratulations to the author and the publisher.

Ron Halweil, MD
from the Internet

Dear Sir,

I must confess that I particularly enjoyed Robert Silverberg's Reflection "The Ablative Absolute" in *Asimov's* December 1996 edition.

This enjoyment stemmed largely from the fact that in my own distant days as a high school student I, too, studied Latin, immersing myself in the various constructions and declensions associated with that now "dead" language.

I doubt that my own writing ability benefited quite as much from my studies as Mr. Silverberg's, nonetheless, the experience was a profoundly beneficial one—if only because it helped me realize what a wonderfully adaptive and organic language is English. "Dead" Latin lives very much within the wider framework of English—as it does even more directly in many of the so-called Romance languages—

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though I doubt that many Italians would agree with Mr. Silverberg's argument that Italian is less graceful for its lack of ablative absolutes (the French would be even less impressed!).

All of which makes me wonder whether the "purists" who seek to "preserve" this or that aspect of English are in fact the antithesis of what they claim to be, i.e.: the guardians of "good" or "correct" English. Granted, the way in which this or that mode of expression is used may be more or less conducive to clear communication, but is use of the language the same as the language itself? I wonder if those who seek to "preserve" don't in fact end up fossilizing?

Mind you, I don't doubt Mr. Silverberg when he states that studying Latin provided, for him, the necessary discipline required if one is to be a fine (let alone successful) writer, and I share his regret that Latin seems to be disappearing from the school curriculum (sadly, in Australia, also!) For myself, Latin was the door that opened upon a love of global history that has remained with me to this day—history being, sadly, another aspect of education that appears to be withering. That famous maxim about forgetting the past comes to mind....

Finally, I was interested by his discussion of the origin of the notion that sentences should never end with a preposition. One of my fondest memories from school concerns the time I was told by my English teacher (a man I greatly respected and who had even—gasp!—published a volume of poetry) that the first ever textbook on English included a chapter on prepositions with the statement that "A preposition is a word you should never end a sentence with"!

The blind leading the blind...?

Yours sincerely,

Brendan Byrne
Pascoe Vale, South Victoria
Australia

Dear Dr. Silverberg,

It will thrill you to find out that Latin is making a comeback, albeit a slow one, to public high schools. That is why, after eighteen years, I will be able to officially use my lowly Latin minor along with my BA in history, MA in history, and Specialist in the education of secondary social studies. Not only am I challenged and a little scared, but also excited. Now I have your eminently eloquent essay, "The Ablative Absolutive," in December's *Asimov's* to show my students that a little time with the ancients is indeed important.

Maybe you or someone can help me find a copy of the Good Doctor Isaac's essay, "Let There Be Light," on the glory of our native tongue's use of both Latinate and Germanic words. It would be appreciated greatly!

Sincerely,

Zan Marie Steadham
Temple, GA

Dear Sirs:

In the past, I have read in editorials and letters to the editor of

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people who wanted the opportunity to read *Asimov's* but who were unable to obtain copies of the magazine. My husband and I have been reading the magazine since April 1980 and enjoyed them. The problem now has come to storage space. Though the magazines are small in size, these and many other materials (books, magazines, etc.) have been read and saved over the years.

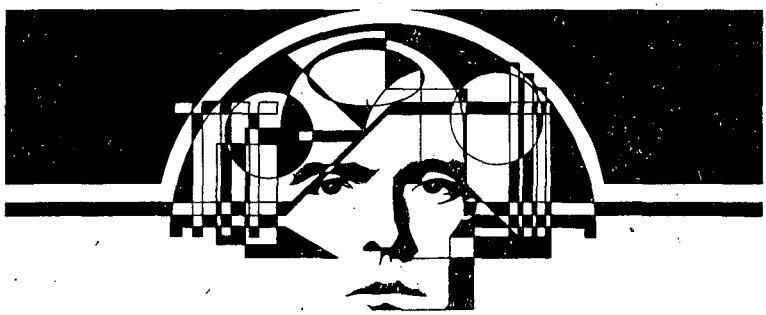
We would like to know of where we could send the magazines. I am sure that various organizations, towns, and peoples have in the past contacted you to either donate or purchase at reduced cost. We are willing to ship the magazines at our expense. We would be most appreciative for your help in this important matter. We would prefer to give the magazines to someone who will be able to enjoy them rather then them ending up in the recycling process.

Thank you for your help.

Mrs. Sharyon (John) DaSilva
Hoffman Estates, IL

Readers, please drop us a line if you know of an appropriate home for these magazines.

—Sheila Williams



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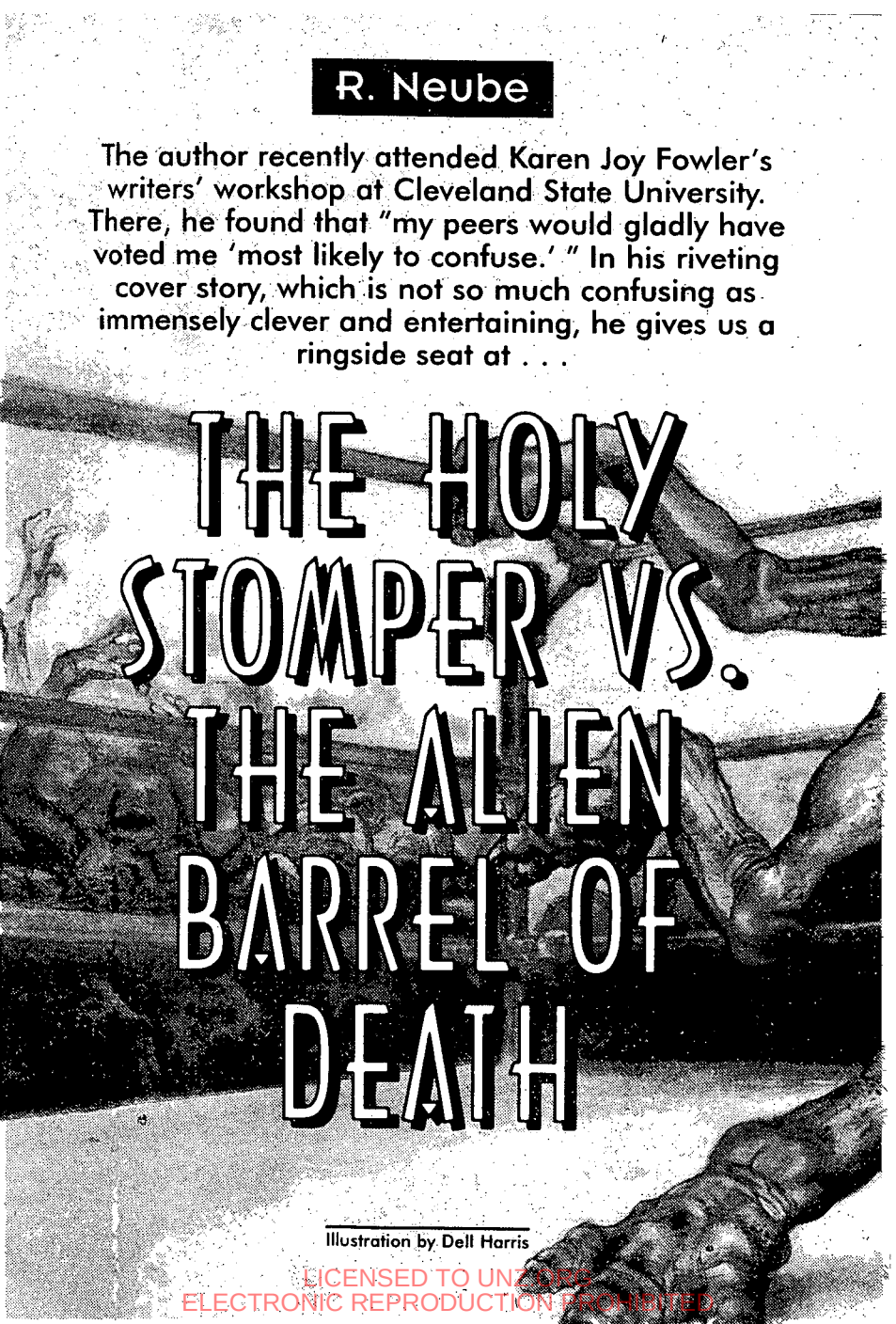
R. Neube

The author recently attended Karen Joy Fowler's writers' workshop at Cleveland State University. There, he found that "my peers would gladly have voted me 'most likely to confuse.' " In his riveting cover story, which is not so much confusing as immensely clever and entertaining, he gives us a ringside seat at . . .

THE HOLY STOMPER VS. THE ALIEN BARREL OF DEATH



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No sooner had I limped off the Greyhound shuttle than a pair of suits snagged me. They escorted my weary bones through the corridors of the good ship *Mead* to a crowded foyer next to an airlock. One of the suits pushed me into a reception line. Had I known, I would have worn shoes.

A petite woman popped into line beside me. Her fingers fussed with the rumpled lay of my jacket. "I'm glad you've finally arrived. What timing! This will be the first time the aliens have left their ship."

"First contact?" I asked, still groggy from a week of flying to this nowhere.

"*Second* contact. They ate the two anthropologists we sent into *their* ship."

"I prefer sociologists myself, but I have a good recipe for anthros. It all depends on the sauce."

It irritated me how she casually dumbed down her jargon for my benefit. Anthropologists studied people, xenopologists studied aliens. Sadder still, she did not even notice that she had insulted my intelligence.

"Don't say *any*thing," she repeated twice. "Just follow my lead and your common sense." She scurried to the front of the line, where she began conferring with a mob of suits and uniforms.

I grinned and did a few knee bends to loosen up after the cramped flight up to the *Mead*. They hadn't told me why I was here, but their check was generous. Having wrestled the circuit through the Dyb' worlds, I understood how to entertain aliens. Perhaps they wanted me to arrange an exhibition for this new species.

The airlock hissed open. The alien resembled a barrel with far too many limbs. A tailor would be driven to commit suicide trying to fit its four uneven arms. A tank on its back pumped a vile concoction through clear tubes stuck here and there into skin the consistency of bark. Its stench brought tears to my eyes. It shuffled by the uniforms, suits, and the petite woman without deigning to stop. It shambled directly to me, then paused, looking me over. It rocked back on four legs, its legion of kneecaps crackling like frying bacon.

I realized that the critter planned to slam that lump of a head into my chin. My instincts took over. I butted *my* forehead into that featureless lump *first*. We both staggered.

Whereupon, it turned and shambled back to the airlock.

I grinned. Having gotten through the ritual uneaten, I assumed the good guys had won.

"What breed of moron *are* you?" shouted the General.

"I may not be Aristotle, but I know who he was," I replied as an MP shoved me into a chair at the conference table.

"What's the moron prattling about?"

"It's Greek to me."

I straightened in my chair, craning to see had who made that last

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crack. It was the petite woman from the reception line, now wearing a badge declaring herself the Chief Xenopologist aboard the *Mead*. The simple fact that someone had a sense of humor in this tomb cheered me.

"Moron!" growled the General. His chestful of medals tinkled whenever he moved. General Windchime. He probably wore them to bed.

"Moron," agreed the Senator in the same tone he deployed for the hostile media.

"Couldn't you find anyone more *appropriate?*"

Clyde Keller, my sponsor, cringed from the General. A toupee slipped off his sweating brow to reveal an array of sensory implants. Maybe he saw something in the infrared that I missed. Poor Clyde took a trembling breath, his face aglow, verging on a blown fuse or a major clot.

"There was no time, sir. He was the only one I could locate who passed the immunological screening." Clyde's voice didn't crack, it shattered.

"*Why* did you strike the Ambassador?" General Windchime waved a fist in my direction as he sputtered.

"It was not the Ambassador. It was the Messiah's personal aide." The Xeno waved a disk at the General.

"Lookit," I said. "I may talk slow, but I'm not stupid. Everybody told me to follow my instincts—so I did."

"Idiot!" Coffee mugs hopped when the General's fist slammed against the table.

"I'm impressed with your mastery of synonyms. Look, it was the *alien* who initiated the head butt. I reacted. If A, then B. His exo-skeleton spooked me at first, but now I know my head is just as hard." I touched the bandage a medico had sprayed on my gashed forehead. "What a *great* noise it made! Did anyone record it? I want a copy for my sounds-effects library."

"Their brains aren't located in the skull feature. He didn't hurt the Pek." The Xeno tossed her disk on the table. "Baxter and Sloane were experts, and *they* got butchered during the contact phase. We must try a different approach, or abandon this expedition."

Shaking his head, a lanky bloke cleared his throat. Given his rail-thin, crushed posture, I pegged him as a Spacer. "If we abandon them, they die. Their vessel is falling apart. It was designed for a useful life of three, maybe four centuries. If Intelligence is correct, it has been flying for more than eight hundred years."

"What exactly are you doing for them?" I asked the Spacer to annoy General Windchime. I promised myself I would annoy these yerps at every opportunity.

The Spacer flashed a dazzling smile. "We've attached work blisters to their hull. I modify our hardware to replace equipment they've allowed to deteriorate. I scrounge parts off every ship that stops here. We're becoming a regular tourist attraction, you know. Their life support is a monster—they require eleven arsenic compounds in their atmosphere."

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The General's thousand-watt glower shut him up. The Spacer stared at his feet, which drew my attention to them. Despite their high shine, his boots were disintegrating. Hairy feet protruded from holes. His jumpsuit was threadbare and patched.

"Why have we brought Citizen Muscle here on board?" asked a burly man wearing a GE corporate uniform. "I could have used the money to buy a new compressor assembly. You *must* increase my department's budget! I—"

"Another Tech heard from," observed the Senator. Acolytes laughed in unison.

"Why *is* he here?" bellowed Windchime, bayoneting in my direction with a gnarled forefinger.

I responded with a more eloquent digit.

The Xeno stood. She spoke slowly, as if weighing each word. "We believe Citizen Scorpio can provide us with insights from his vocation, which has evolved into a religious aspect of Pek life. I wanted—"

"Moron," chorused a cast of dozens. The General launched into scund bites worthy of a championship grudge match.

I pulled out my chip-plate and caught Clyde's eye. He produced his.

I CAN DO A FUND RAISER FOR THE PEK, I typed, my pinkie on the broadcast button. LAST YEAR, I PUT TOGETHER A CARD FOR MARS FOREST, INC. AND FILLED STANTON ARENA. WE RAISED $700K FOR THEM. TALK TO ME LATER.

Clyde nodded as my message appeared on his chipper. He smiled like he was going to cry before he slipped into the corridor.

"This is a waste of *my* time. Carver, see that—" The General waved in my direction, shooing me. "—our new moron gets the standard briefing in his cabin. Ito, have you finished your analysis of the radiation emission? Is it a leak or an exhaust by-product? Matrice, I expect a full report within the hour."

"*Matarice,*" screamed the Xeno with a whisper. "My name is Matarice."

Clyde had promised me "comparable" quarters. Comparable to *what?* A jail cell? Most jails I had experienced were far larger, far more homey. I felt blessed to have a toilet, doubly blessed to have a ventilation slot. Between thumps, an occasional whiff of putative fresh air graced my cabin.

I plugged into the comm port and dumped messages for my various enterprises into the ship's computer for later broadcast. My paper factory on Nok was of particular concern, since the union was suing me for "unfair labor practices" after I gave 80 percent of my stock to the workers.

"You can't win, boyo. Next time, bribe the union prez and be done with it!"

It was fortunate that the *Mead* expedition had approached me in October. Over-the-hill for steady wrestling, I made a point of vacationing and healing during my birth month. However, I *was* responsible for assem-

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bling a Thanksgiving card for the Liu Arena on Nok. The Barbarian continued to hang tough, insisting on points of the gate before he would sign a contract to wrestle.

"Yeah, like I make money giving away points," I grumbled while typing my fingers raw. "You get a few shots on prime time and you think you're a superstar!"

Stretching atop my spartan cot, I opened an MRE carton. I couldn't tell whether dinner was chocolate cake or steak. The *Mead*'s galley had incinerated after a tech stripped its sensors for the alien ship. The crew now dined on surplus military field rations.

Did General Windchime dine on this muck? Sure, sell me a Martian ice cap, too!

The screen on my wall beeped, announcing the start of my briefing. They spared no expense, showing me the *Monitor* episode about the Pek and their odyssey. Nothing like being educated by a children's news program—fortunately, it was my favorite show.

The Pek's generation ship swept into Sol System at .6 light speed, a pitted, grey cylinder twenty klicks in length. Probes were dispatched from the Pek ship. The atmosphere of Mars was too tenuous, Earth was too wet, and Venus fitted even an alien's definition of hell. Before using the sun as a slingshot, however, their sensory matrix captured three hours of 1957 television—a soap opera, the local news from Cincinnati, the CBS evening news, and a wrestling fest from Texas.

Their third Messiah spent the rest of his/her (Don't you hate omnisexual aliens? Would impregnating yourself be incest?) life studying those programs. The Peks had fled their sin-choked world for a paradise promised by their *original* Messiah. They'd scoured twenty-one stellar systems without discovering Eden— then they tuned into championship wrestling.

Poor critters.

A few years shy of two centuries later, the *Mead* stumbled onto the Pek gen-ship while flying to study primitives on Quince III. The ailing generation ship was snailing along at a third of light speed, gradually slowing and falling apart in the largest void in this end of the galaxy. The *Mead* followed it cautiously until they confirmed that the Pek vessel no longer possessed external sensors. They attached surveillance modules to its hull, and began collecting data.

This process was aided by the fact that the Peks were broadcasting TV programming of their *own* creation. Around the clock, a cornucopia of Pek history, religion, and culture filled the airwaves, formatted as news, soaps, and wrestling. Performance offerings, to their supreme deity.

I nodded out during the cultural stuff. My eyes cracked open during a static-filled Pek soap opera. The aliens added snow to their pristine pictures in order to imitate those holy signals of yore—from back in 1957.

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Barrel-shaped, quad-limbed actors lumbered across the screen. Eight joints per limb made their arms more expressive than their whistling voices. Tall grey ones waved and whistled about infidelity. Short blue ones pushed thin orange ones who whined about their drinking problems. What the plot lacked in sense, the actors compensated for with boundless energy.

I resumed my slumber.

My day began with the usual aches, not unusual for someone who had broken 106 bones in his career. My contract specified room service. The personnel on the other end of the phone line pretended not to understand. Clyde Keller refused to accept my call; his secretary claimed he had flown back to Mars.

Checking my e-mail, I found that the Barbarian had caved, but wanted a five grand signing bonus. The check from the Sol Trade Commission to pay for my transportation to the middle of nowhere had cleared. However, my paycheck from Mead University Research, Inc. had bounced.

Typical! Folks always tried to take advantage of me.

The Xeno arrived with a bucket of Cajun kelp sticks. "I am Citizen Tiffany Matarice. Citizen Scorpio, may I call you Romney?"

"Sure thing, Tiff," I replied, scarfing the kelp. "Your check bounced."

"That is not important. You passed muster. Romney, the Pek have requested that you wrestle for them!"

"Unless every one of the eighteen clauses in my contract is fulfilled, I'm not moving from this cabin. This isn't professional."

"There, uh." She paused to stare at the scars around my neck where Bubba Brochoski cut my throat with a broken bottle during a Texas brawl match. "There must be a mix-up at the bank."

I looked at her for a long moment. "Folks assume I'm stupid because I'm big. Folks enjoy taking advantage of stupid people. It makes them feel better about their own miserable lives. I want my money, Tiff. But, before you snacker off, tell me how to score a decent breakfast on this scow."

Matarice was a grey gamine—skin and hair dyed to match her gunfighter's eyes. She moved with too much spring under the ship's half standard grav, reinforcing the gamine illusion. Silence was her game. She stood and stared holes through me.

Grey lady, stormy glare. I forgot the rest of the poem.

Sitting on my cot, I prepared for a long game. I blanked my mind, no mean task considering the dearth of breakfast aboard the *Mead*. Eventually, I nodded off.

Shortly after I woke, an orderly delivered a small box. It was filled with Martian bucks and Taylor dollars, Nok hundred-dollar coins and finger-sized Dyb' cash ingots, a sealed plasticard of antique rubles, and

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credit-card vouchers. Took me half an hour with a currency exchange chart to tally my pelf.

I decided not to charge my usual bad-check fee. My generous nature has ever been my bane.

Despite my nose filters, the alien's smell reminded me of the Avondale riots of my youth. Burning tires, summer sweat, and charred flesh—the stench followed the Pek like a smog bank. I sidled, then dropped for a knee-walk, spooking my barrel-shaped opponent to the other side of the ring. I winked at the camera, strutting mime I'd mastered from Charlie Chaplin films.

During my study of Pek wrestling technique, I'd noticed that they didn't play to the camera and the future revenue the home audience represented. Daresay they never suffered nightmares about ratings.

The yerp threw one of its triangular feet at me. I had been waiting for that move. Ducking beneath the blow, I balanced its second thigh atop my shoulder and commenced circle dancing. The sucker had three other feet and would kick my teeth in the instant it regained its balance.

A nifty thing about an opponent with eight joints per limb was the opportunity to grab the captive foot and beat the Pek with it. Gorgeous George and Goshawk Geoffrey could only have dreamt of such sterling schtick. After the audience grew bored of me flailing that lump with its own foot, I backstepped and drop-kicked the sucker over the top rope.

Time for a bow and a kiss toward the camera.

I prayed that my VCR aboard the *Mead* was recording true. There wasn't a vid-promoter in Sol System who wouldn't fork over $100K for a copy of this match. The word "auction" echoed through my brain's greed center.

I grinned at the ref until it turned away from me. Whereupon, I drop-kicked the ref over the ropes too. The crowd's uproar made the racket in Deimos Square Gardens sound like a kitten's fart. My victory prance kept them whistling. As my opponent came to its feet, I threw myself through the ropes and splattered the yerp to the metal deck.

Mass times velocity equaled ratings cubed.

Rolling off my foe, I "accidentally" swept the ref's legs from beneath it. The aliens shared their joy by throwing green squishy fruit at me. Stealing the Masked Manchurian's trademark, I backflipped from the apron into the center of the ring.

I loved low grav!

In lieu of the tobacco smoke the aliens had seen filling the wrestling arena in their intercepted vid, the Pek burnt compost for their sacred ambiance. It was perfume compared to the aliens' reek. Using the reduced grav, I sprang into the overhead lights, hung, then made a double flip down to the ring. My staggering impact was less than perfect, but the Peks went wild.

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Performance offerings. I danced for the camera. Yeah, I could double my appearance fee after this vid hit the networks. Triple!

I made the mistake of allowing the Pek back into the ring. It came at me like a missile, bayoneting its nonhead into my belly. My spleen leapt into my sinus cavity. Its mitts raked my face, trying to rip the filters from my nose.

Trying to *kill* me!

Breaking free, I collapsed into a corner. Rocketing in again, the Pek bounced off my size-sixteen boot. Scooping the yerp up, I staggered to lift it as my vertebrae compressed. The throw was sheer luck. I couldn't have *aimed* the squirming lump for a direct hit on the referee. The deck rang like a bell.

"Give me some real competition!" I screamed at camera three in my stilted Pek. Xeno Tiff had rehearsed me a hundred times, getting the phrase whistle-perfect. My throat filter felt funny. Had it dislodged? I began hacking worse than an escapee from a TB colony.

The taste of arsenic reminded me of the eighth grade when the Freemont Razors tried to drown me in a rusty toilet before homeroom.

The ref rolled under the ropes. My foe followed. It rolled, I rocked. I hopped up and down on the alien until its shell cracked, the yerp screaming like a puppy in a garbage crusher. (Another trick the Razors taught me. Poor Rover. I could never bear to own another pet.)

The bell rang. Pulling me off my opponent, the ref wrapped a belt around my waist. It was silver, the same color as Pek blood.

The ex-champ's tag-team partner raced down the aisle and hopped into the ring. Pure stereotype. I swept its legs out from under it and kicked it until my toes ached. Backing off, I waited for the Pek to rise before scoop-slamming the fool over the top and onto the unforgiving metal deck.

The studio audience went ape, showering me with something ooshy that resembled fish guts.

My next cough sprayed blood.

They ambushed me as soon as I boarded the *Mead*. The General and his staff got in my face. Dizzy and puny, I slumped against the bulkhead hacking and cursing. They stayed in my face. I blew out my nasal filters. Green snot earned me some breathing space.

"Moron!" bellowed General Windchime.

"It's like breathing broken glass. You people are paying for my replacement lungs."

Windchime tried to slap me. He screamed when I snapped his forearm. His aide went for her sidearm. She screamed, too, once I broke her wrist. Some might have considered my response childish, but sucking arseno-hydrocarbon poisons gave me an attitude.

A dozen MP's swarmed me with their electroprods. At least the voltage twitched my spleen back into place.

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Matarice waited in my cabin. She expressed no surprise when the uniformed gangsters dumped me at her feet. She patiently bided her time until my spasms subsided. I sat upright and grinned. She kicked my brain loose.

"You were *not* supposed to kill it!" she screamed, and kicked and kicked.

I recovered enough to parry the final blows. Despite artificial grav, long-term spacing sapped folks' endurance.

"Is someone dumping steroids in your water supply?" I asked politely.

"I'll have you up on charges of murder!"

"It was self-defense. They only saw the vid. They haven't a clue about the reality. If I hadn't—" I burst out in laughter, a miracle considering the way my lungs crawled into my throat. Arsenic wasn't a bad buzz, a cross between good pot and a baseball bat upside the head.

"Moron!"

"What? Is that word a *Mead* tradition?"

"You murdered a non-human! We can't cover up something like that. We're trying to *save* them, not stomp them to death!"

"Yeah, life is a rerun of *Star Whatsit,* and I'm trashing the prime bloody directive. Beam down to reality, Tiff! Did Baxter and Sloane go meekly to their slaughter? Lookit, we have more important matters to discuss."

"Murderer!" Her eyes flickered, swirling darker shades of grey.

"These barrel bum are a species known only from these seven thousand religious fanatics. They're so weirded out that they've stopped fixing their ship. They're trying to *blackmail* their deity into action! Their wrestlers are killing each other like Aztecs sacrificing to their gods. If they pray hard enough . . . *if* their performance offerings are sincere enough . . . if, if, if! Those bizarre yerps are—"

"You cannot judge another species. That is racist. Moron! You cannot—"

"Lookit, Tiff, they weren't too tightly wrapped *before* they spent the last five generations in space. Why do they broadcast their offerings? They're telling their deity that they have received the communication and understand—but they *don't.* They're faking it out of desperation. I think—"

"That is one of a myriad exclusive theories, Citizen Scorpio. You are not qualified—"

"To exercise my common sense? They refuse to discuss their religion with you people because they're waiting for one of *us,* a pro wrestler, one of their deity's messengers, to explain the mysteries to them. We're their Hermes."

The Grey Woman sputtered. "My peers and I have invested *years* deconstructing, dissecting every frame of their broadcasts. We have identified their symbology. We have learned their language, and have a good idea about the motifs behind their crypto-TV culture. Yet *you* dare saunter in, commit murder, and announce *your* solution!"

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"That's the size of it, meka." I remoted the TV. The Pek news appeared, the *Mead*'s masterputer providing awkward English subtitles.

"It was *my* idea to bring you here," she said glumly. "The Trade Commission will probably have me fired. The Pek will never listen to us again. Do you have any *idea* what you've destroyed?" The Grey Woman slumped onto a toadstool and stared at the screen.

"If I'm wrong, you can blame Clyde Keller. Just as well, since the coward hightailed out of here on the last shuttle. Just watch the screen. I'll let the Pek do my arguing for me."

The anchor-alien wore a blond wig. The Pek spoke of a fire in the warehouse district, a shooting in front of a house of ill-repute, and a six car pile-up blocking rush hour. It proceeded as most rituals did—smooth and confident, mimicking the recording of yore without a clue of what repute (sick or well) or a rush hour might be.

"Wrong about what? What are you saying?" she whispered, staring at the screen.

I coughed into my fist, spraying a fine mist of arsenic-laced blood. The coughing came with such intensity that my toes shortened. I'd count myself fortunate if my lungs were the only things requiring replacement.

Clips from my match appeared, intercut with mouthings from the current Messiah. Matarice froze, grey eyes growing wide, glowing in the light of the screen.

"The Messiah *never* appears on broadcasts. *Never!* What have you *done?*"

The alien spoke so rapidly that the subtitles failed to keep pace. But the Messiah called me holy. I could envision my new moniker on the marquee—The Holy Stomper.

I hadn't expected the xenopologist to throw up on my carpet. Actually, it was an improvement on the fiber's color. I patted her back.

"What have you done to my Peks?" she moaned. "What kind of maniac *are* you?"

"I grew up on the wrong side of the trailer park," I explained to annoy my guest. Anyone who kicked me in the head deserved to be tortured by my life's story. "My mom was crazy over her God like the Pek are over theirs. That's why I understand them."

"I don't wish to listen to your personal history," she hissed through clenched teeth, each word intoned as a curse.

"Ah, but from history blooms knowledge! I grew up on the streets. When I was seventeen, Howard 'The Blade' Smith took it in his head to kill me. Never did figure why."

"I know why," she growled.

"I broke into the Razor's clubhouse and hid under his bed. When he went to sleep, I crawled out and used the axe I'd been hugging for hours. He had $50K in his pillowcase.

"While I was waiting for the next bus out of town, I took measure of

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myself. The money was a one-time shot, so I had to strike gold my first time out. I was too lazy for business, not smart enough for college, not vicious enough for crime. I went down the checklist. And, in the end, I went straight from the Chi-town bus station to a cosmetic surgeon and bought a muscle job.

"I own mines on Mars, a paper factory on Nok, and export companies on three different poleis. I could have retired years ago, but I love being silly. It's my talent, my greatest strength. And people underestimate me because I look stupid—that's my greatest asset. You people have studied the Pek to death, but you treat them like microbes under a microscope. They might be aliens, but they enjoy being silly, too!

"Believe me, I know what I'm doing."

She threw up again.

I hadn't thought about Mom in years. She would have understood ceasing maintenance on a spacecraft to show her faith in God. Her God's "Plan" called for her husband to abandon her and robbers to rape and butcher her. "His Plan," she babbled over dinner every night, explaining the latest disaster to overtake her. Her eyes sparkled when she spoke about her deity, the way a junkie's eyes sparkled after dosing.

Once Matarice left, I gingerly avoided the puddles she left behind on my way to my chip-plate. I tapped into the comm system, then tapped a message for my accountants to score everything they could on the *Mead*'s finances. It felt important to discover why their check had bounced.

When an opponent was too fast, you attacked his legs. When they were too strong, you had to be faster. When they were generals and fuzzy scientists, you had to hire *smarter* people.

I love my Gold Card!

There was precious little difference between locker rooms, be they aboard the Pek gen-ship or Lunar Square Gardens. Although here, the grotty sock stench was replaced by a grotty arsenic stench.

I squeezed my nose, feeling the tips of my nasal filters; I squeezed my throat, feeling the lump of that filter. A secondary sheet filter I wrapped around my mouth and nose. Three layers was as much as I could do and still breathe. With luck, the wrap would divert my opponent's attention and keep the alien from yanking out my internal filters.

With luck . . .

"Four scope and seben yeaps," I said through my mask. You couldn't wrestle unless you could curse. That was a Law of Nature.

Aliens moved as quietly as Martian muggers. I glanced up to find myself surrounded by half a dozen of the tall Greys—the dangerous ones. Their reek clogged my nostrils, defying the filters. The Pek swayed as they whistled. Wasn't that the old *Lassie* theme? I unwrapped my mouth, then replied with the same, earning a round of applause.

"Will you tell us?" asked a small blue Pek, elbowing through the crowd.

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I sidled, getting my back against the wall. The Greys kowtowed to the Blue. It smelled different—fill an old tire with roses and ignite it with kerosene. The Greys squatted and slapped their mitts on the deck. It echoed like thunder.

"Will you reveal the Secrets?" the Blue asked in perfect English as it tugged at my sweats.

I winked at the critter. They liked winking. Lacking eyelids, or anything that might pass as eyes, they suffered eyelash envy. "You speak the lingo well."

"My English is good to the last drop, like the Marlboro House Man," replied the alien proudly. "Will you share the Secrets?"

"Do you understand the word 'rigged'?"

Apparently, the Blue did, whistling a quick translation to its comrades. I would have sworn it was the theme from *The Andy Griffith Show*. I snapped my fingers at the appropriate moment. All those video history telecourses I took while on the circuit were paying dividends.

"Predetermined?"

"Close enough. I am told. My opponent is told. The Boss decides who will win the big matches."

"Told by *your* Prophet?" The Blue advanced, tilting its body in a querulous fashion. Its limbs made clicking noises. The other Pek grew agitated, stomping their feet as they milled.

"*Everything* is predetermined. If A, then B. Soap operas are written to a formula. If A, then B. The news is about folks. Folks react in the same way, given the same circumstances. If A, then B. The Boss studies the market demographics and decides who will earn the most money by drawing the largest crowd. If Audience, then Bucks. One way or the other, *every*thing is rigged!"

More Blues appeared. A mob of Greys filled the doorway. Whistling grew in volume until my teeth ached. Limbs waved and whacked. I picked up a container of talc and surreptitiously unscrewed its cap. However feeble, any diversion would be better than none, should the natives decide to make me into a Slim Jim.

"Who is The Boss?" asked the smallest of the Blues. It lacked a leg and two arms, not to mention sporting a massive dent in its barrel-body. The veteran must have lost more than a few bouts.

"It depends. Different arenas have different Bosses."

The maimed Blue eased forward, the others parting to give him/her plenty of room. This Pek wore a massive belt of silver. I intuited it was their current Messiah, despite it not resembling the one I saw on TV. I bowed. My fingers pulled the belt I'd won off the bench. Bowing again, I offered the belt to the Messiah, smiling like a village idiot.

"Every Boss has a Boss. The trick is to find someone who can rig the Boss. Allow me to explain . . ."

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The Messiah snapped its arm joints while I spoke. First the Blues, then the Greys, slapped their bodies in unison, in reply. It might have been a happy sound to them. It reminded me of a tray of silver spoons being tossed across a tile floor.

"What the hell have you *done?* They haven't left the Prayer Arena in two days! Intell says—" Matarice excelled at storming into a room.

"Is N. Tell any relation to Willie Tell? I 'rastled him on New Berne once."

"*Intelligence,* you lump! They've tapped into every system on the ship. They can tell how often the Pek flush their toilets."

"So much for your putative sense of humor. Huh, come to think of it, there weren't any toilets in the locker room. Do Peks have bowel mo—"

"I don't care! What did you *tell* them? They *never* cancel a night of wrestling! Now they've stopped broadcasting altogether." She spoke loud and slow, as if I were stupid and deaf.

"I told them the truth, of course."

I kept one eye on the monitor. Figures marched down the screen in tidy columns. Legions of numbers had been the focus of my attention for hours. My accountants had ordered the *Mead*'s four previous budgets directly from the Trade Commission's Depository, then sent me the germane files. My bouncing check had been the source of the original afflatus, but I was light years beyond that.

"*Which* truth?" Matarice's grey face contorted, bringing to mind Reaper McGuire after he'd ruptured himself during a mistimed Boston Squash.

"Which truth, Romney?" This time honey dripped from the question. You would not find her smile in the dictionary under "sincere" unless a shark wrote it.

"Did you know someone is peculating from the *Mead*'s grant money?" I said. "The hard copy is next to the lamp. Take notice how 17.3 percent of the budget for wages is transferred into a 'General Accounts' fund. From there, it is deposited into the account of Citizen Frederick Brooks, FN2914-336-8106 as a consultancy fee. Valid code, but no such person exists—this is one slick crime."

"What? What qualifies *you* to— No, money isn't important. What did you tell the *Pek?* Stop avoiding the question."

"You think I'm just another pretty face? I earned a degree in accounting to keep track of my businesses. When you're always on the road, you have all this time on your hands. Aren't telecourses great? You people have lost over thirty million, Tiff. Pretty soon, that could add up to some serious money."

"The Pek! What did you tell them?"

"A basic truth. When the game is fixed, you must hire yourself a Fixer."

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Her face twitched. People with grey-dyed skin should never blush. "Game? Aliens cannot distinguish the nuisances of English. I—"

"You mean *nuances*. What's the prob? You have failed for years to find common ground with the Pek. I *have*. All their praying is begging overtime that their new Champion will win the big match."

"Champion?"

I scooted away from the grey gamine, mindful of her penchant for painting the carpet with lunch, as well as kicking like a rabid mule.

I grinned. My petition had percolated through the Trade Commission's Audit Committee by now. The Martian media moguls had digested my revelations and would shortly open the bidding war on the rest of the story. Phil Crockett, aka The Stomper, president of Crockett Construction Ltd., would still be debating whether the profit inherent in the gimmick of the century would offset the cost of building a home for my new clients. Best of all, General Windchime would soon discover that I had bribed one of his officers for an hour's unsupervised access to the communication center.

All the burners were on high. My pots were boiling. Chef Scorpio was preparing a feast, though I had yet to figure out who I was having for supper.

"If you're smart, you can use this disaster to your benefit, Tiff. The embezzlements can be blamed for your failure with the Pek. If you and the other scientists come down on the Trade Commission's side, they will be grateful. As PR-minded as the Commission is, the *Mead* might even get their research expanded. I, for one, will be requesting your aid. I'll need your people for another year or two to get everything working properly."

"What are you saying?"

"You people play the villain, and I play the righteous Champion. We fight—you people lose."

"*What?*"

"What do you think 10 percent of a civilization is worth? By the way, we'll be suing the Trade Commission and your university for malfeasance and social sodomy. Okay, I don't know the legal terms. That's why I've retained Peterson, Danson, and Grier."

"But, but—"

"There will be an army of politicians eager to join our cause. Everybody hates the Commission."

"Suing? But, the *Mead*—"

"Don't worry, that's just for the consumption of the press. We're going after the deep pockets, not you people."

"Wa-what?" moaned Matarice.

I smiled at her. "Isn't that an agent's job?" I said brightly.

It was going to be a *hell* of a good fight. And the ratings would be out of this world!

Literally! ●

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To a Scorpion

Jeweled hunter,
the years have been
kind to you;
can I be less?
You are only
what you are:
horrible;
perfect.
Four hundred
million years
before I came
to hate and fear you,
you braved
the Silurian shore,
and, four hundred
million years since,
you are your
same old self.
I, however,
am much changed
since descending
from the trees:
horrible
but imperfect—
instinct suffices
no longer,
unless I let it.
Go on your way,
thoughtless killer.
I'll not go
out of mine
to crush you
underfoot.

—Steven Utley

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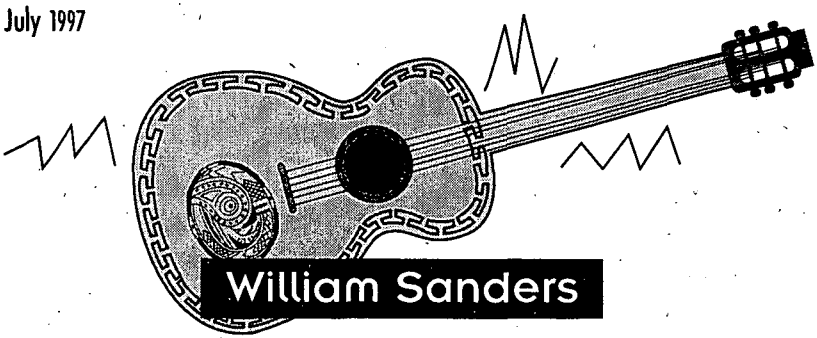

William Sanders

William Sanders, a former powwow dancer and Cherokee gospel singer, lives in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. In his latest story for *Asimov's*, he reveals the magical power of . . .

WORDS AND MUSIC

Jimmy Hominy was fifty-four years old and had been a *didahnvwisgi*—what the whites called a shaman or medicine man; a lot of Cherokees said *adanisgi*, wizard, and some said plainly *'sgili*, witch, though not to his face—for most of his adult life. He had also done a hitch in Nam, played guitar for Buck Owens on two national tours, and been married to a Kiowa woman, so all in all he figured he'd been around and not much could surprise him. But when the preacher from Limestone showed up at Jimmy's trailer out on Stick Ross Mountain Road and said his church house was being witched, Jimmy's chin dropped so far it nearly hit his chest.

"*Doyu?*" he said, rubbing a big callused hand over a face the color and texture of an old saddle. "Somebody's witching a church?"

"So they say," the preacher said. "You hadn't heard?"

"Hey," Jimmy Hominy said, "I stay clear of that end of the county. You go listening to those Indians down around Limestone, you're liable to hear anything."

He grinned at the preacher. "But then that's your job, right? Got to love all God's children. Even the ones he probably wishes he'd drowned, like the Sparrowhawk brothers. Better you than me, *chooch*."

The preacher didn't return the grin. He was a bony-faced man somewhere in his forties, with a big nose and dark brown eyes. His thin

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straight black hair was combed forward in a failed effort to hide a hairline in full retreat, the inheritance of a white grandfather. He had on a really bad black suit.

His name was Eli Blackbird, but Jimmy Hominy usually thought of him simply as the preacher, because he was the only preacher Jimmy knew personally. Oh, every now and then some local Bible wrangler would come calling with the missionary light in his eyes—it would be a big coup to talk a notorious character like Jimmy Hominy into taking the Jesus road—but they didn't stay long enough to get acquainted.

But this one never got on Jimmy's case about following the old ways, or accused him of worshipping the Devil, and Jimmy had finally decided he was all right. Now here he was sitting at Jimmy's kitchen table with a story about the Sparrowhawk boys witching his church, and Jimmy didn't know *what* to think.

The preacher let out a long sigh and began fumbling in the pockets of his suit jacket. "I admit the Sparrowhawks aren't easy to love—"

He pulled out a black briar pipe and a plastic pouch and began cramming tobacco into the bowl, spilling a little blizzard of Prince Albert flakes in the process. Jimmy didn't say anything about it. The place was already in a mess anyway. Had been for a couple of years, ever since his wife had died.

Jimmy said, "Yeah, Luther and Bobby Sparrowhawk been nothing but bullies and sneak thieves since they were kids. And yet their mama was a real fine lady."

The preacher nodded. "Oh, yes. Old Annie Sparrowhawk." He was fishing around in his pockets again. Jimmy pushed a box of wooden matches across the table. "Thanks . . . as a matter of fact, that's where the trouble began. Annie left that property to the church when she died, and her sons have been trying to get it back ever since."

He struck a match and applied it to his pipe. "Which," he said, puffing, "they can't do. Annie paid a lawyer to draw up a will, legal and airtight."

"What do they want with it? That rocky old land around Limestone's not worth anything. So damn poor the whites never even bothered to steal it."

"It is now," the preacher told him through a cloud of bluish smoke. "Word is some developer from Tulsa has plans for the area."

Jimmy thought about it. While he thought he held out his hand. "Uh, you think you could spare—"

The preacher handed over the tobacco pouch. Jimmy got his own pipe from his shirt pocket and loaded it and lit up. The preacher didn't notice that Jimmy didn't bother to use a match. Or if he did notice he pretended not to.

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"Surprised they don't just burn you out," Jimmy said at last.

"They've made threats. But they're both on probation for assault as it is. Any rough stuff, they go to the pen. The sheriff already warned them."

"So now they're trying to witch you out. Wonder who they got to do it."

The preacher looked disappointed. He must have been hoping Jimmy would know who was doing the witching, or could find out. Probably thought people like Jimmy stayed in touch some way, like those white kids Jimmy's grandson was always talking with on his computer.

Jimmy said, "Could be they're trying to do it themselves. That's crazy, but then *they're* crazy."

"It's possible," the preacher agreed. "They do have a reputation for dabbling in, uh, the occult. And yet they both got religion last year. Bobby married a white girl from one of those holy-roller churches and now he and Luther are in there at every revival, shouting and speaking in tongues, even handling snakes."

"The snakes got my sympathy," Jimmy said sincerely.

He knew what the preacher was getting at. The boondock holiness outfits were even stricter than other Indian churches when it came to "heathen" ways; some would kick you out just for going to stomp dances, let alone anything heavy.

But there was nothing so unusual about Cherokees trying to work both sides of that particular street. Almost all the people who came to Jimmy seeking cures for illness or protection against witchcraft or interpretations of dreams—he didn't do love charms—were solid members of Bible churches that officially condemned such things as the Devil's work. It was just something people didn't talk about.

Jimmy said, "I didn't think you preachers believed in these superstitions."

This time the preacher did grin. "That's the white half of me. The Indian half—" He spread his hands. "It doesn't really matter what I think. If the people believe the place is being witched, they'll stay away. You know that. Last Sunday we had half the usual turnout."

"So you thought if they heard you were bringing in your own *didahnvwisgi*—" Jimmy had to laugh. "Boy," he said, "now I've heard everything. The church asking a medicine man for help."

If the preacher minded being redassed he didn't let it show. He said, "Actually, I came to invite you to an all-night gospel singing. We're having one this Friday night."

Jimmy quit laughing. The preacher had hit one of his weak spots. He might be a long way outside the church, but he dearly loved Cherokee gospel music. Both his parents had been noted singers on the Oklahoma gospel scene; his older brother Clyde had sung with them, before running

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off to become a honky-tonk musician. Some of Jimmy's earliest memories were of all-night singings, and of falling asleep in the back of the family pickup to the sound of gospel music coming through the trees.

He said, "Real old-fashioned Indian gospel? Not that fancy new crap, sounds like they're planning to go to Heaven in an elevator?"

The preacher nodded. "Should be a lot of good singers there."

"I thought you said people were staying away."

"They won't if they know you're going to be there."

Jimmy didn't know what to say to that.

"And," the preacher added, "the women are baking pies."

Jimmy groaned softly. Pie was his other weakness. "You got me," he said. "What time do you want me there?"

The preacher stood up. "Come by the house about seven." He was obviously trying hard not to look too pleased with himself. "We may as well go together."

"*Howa,*" Jimmy agreed, getting up too. "You can tell them I'll be there."

Friday evening at almost exactly seven Jimmy Hominy stopped his old Mercury in front of Eli Blackbird's house near the tiny crossroads community of Limestone. The preacher came to the door as Jimmy stepped up on the porch. "*'Siyo, Jimi.*"

"*'Siyo, chooch.*" Jimmy nodded in the direction of the Mercury. "Let's take my car." He didn't want to ride in the preacher's little Japanese car, which was cramped and uncomfortable for a man his size and had screwy door latches besides.

"Sure." The preacher followed Jimmy out to the road and bent to open the Mercury's door. The dome light came on and he stopped, staring at the oversized guitar case lying in the back seat. "Bringing that thing?" he said. "Going to play, are you?"

"Could be," Jimmy said, going around to his side. "You never know."

The church was a small, low concrete-block building with no steeple or other identifying features except a four-by-eight plywood sign that read LIMESTONE INDEPENDENT INDIAN CHURCH. The words were repeated underneath in the curling black letters of the Cherokee alphabet.

Right now the building was dark except for a single bulb burning above the front door. The big grassy clearing beside the church, however, was lit by several floodlights rigged on poles or in the trees. A flatbed truck had been parked at the edge of the woods to serve as a stage, and two men were crouched on its bed doing something to a set of amplifiers, while a tall kid in a Seminole jacket fooled with the tuning knobs of an electric bass. Teenage boys were setting out rows of folding chairs. Other

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people stood or moved about the area, mostly near the long wooden tables where women served food on paper plates.

"I thought we'd have the singing outdoors," the preacher remarked as they got out of the Mercury. The dusty parking area was already half full of pickup trucks and heavy old cars. "Looks like a nice night for it."

It did. The sky was clear and full of fat white stars; a light warm breeze was coming through the woods, bringing various pleasant smells. It also carried the scent of blackberry pie from the tables. Jimmy's nose began to twitch.

"Well," the preacher said, "I better get up there." He gestured in the direction of the flatbed truck, where one of the men was now adjusting a floor-stand microphone. A brief horrible squeal came from the speakers. "Almost time."

When the preacher was gone Jimmy stood still for a moment, getting the feel of the scene. So far he couldn't detect anything wrong; at least the hair on his arms wasn't standing up, or his fingers tingling, or any of the other warning signs. If this place had been witched, it had been done very badly.

Or else, of course, it had been done very well.

He began to walk, staying in the shadows and avoiding people, making himself ignore the pie smell. As he neared the darkened church he started to pick up a certain vague sourness, like a single out-of-tune string. More curious than worried—whatever it was, it didn't feel dangerous—he moved closer.

He found it easily, under the front steps of the church: a little buckskin bundle, tied with rawhide. Dry things crunched and crackled as he rolled it in his hand. He didn't untie it; he knew pretty much what it contained. He walked back to his car and tossed the little bundle onto the front seat. Later, maybe, he would tie the bundle to a rock and drop it into a moving stream, and then whoever had made it would come down with severe chills for a week or so.

If this was the worst the Sparrowhawks could do, the preacher was worrying about nothing. Still, he was here now and he might as well do the job right.

He dug in his pockets and got out his short-stemmed pipe and the little bag of prepared tobacco, while up on the improvised stage Eli Blackbird commenced speaking into the microphone, welcoming the people who were now starting to drift over and take seats. The men behind him quit messing with the amps and began opening cases and getting out guitars.

Jimmy packed the tobacco carefully into the pipe, making sure not to spill a single flake. He did not sing or speak over the tobacco; there was

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no need. He had doctored the tobacco that morning, down by the banks of the little creek that ran behind his place, holding it up to the rising sun and stirring it with his forefinger, singing the appropriate *igawesdi* words, four times over. Now the tobacco was programmed, needing only to be burned to release its power.

He lit the tobacco and began walking, puffing. The preacher was now leading the crowd in "Amazing Grace":

"U-ne-hla-nv-hi U-we-ji
I-ga-gu-yv-he-i—"

Blowing smoke, Jimmy Hominy circled the church grounds counterclockwise, taking in the building and the singing area and even the two outhouses. The preacher began a prayer in Cherokee: *"Agidoda, galvladi ehi, galvquodiyu gesesdi dejado'a'i—"* He was still at it when Jimmy started around for the second time.

He circled the grounds four times, following carefully in his own tracks. He was aware of people looking at him—mostly sideways or behind his back—but nobody spoke to him, and the few people in his path suddenly found reasons to go stand somewhere else when they saw him coming.

At the end he knocked the ash out of the pipe and stood leaning on the Mercury's fender, listening to the music. The first group of the evening, the Gospel Travelers from Adair County, were hammering down hard on "I Will Not Live Always":

"U-tli-na-qua-du-li-hv ga-lv-la-di jo-sv-i,
Ga-lo-ne-dv Ji-sa, u-wo-du-hi-yu,
Da-ni-no-gi-sdi-sgv-i."

—with skinny little Grover Fourkiller singing bass like a son of a bitch and Louise Soap hitting the highs clean as an Arkansas mockingbird.

Jimmy decided it was time to check out that blackberry pie.

It had been a good season for blackberries and two different women had just set out fresh pies as Jimmy came up to the table. Naturally he had to have a piece of each, so as not to hurt anybody's feelings. He was finishing the second piece when a voice behind him said, *"'Siyo, Jimi. Jiyosihas'?"*

Jimmy jumped and turned around. Idabel Grasshopper stood there, holding a big steaming pot. She said, "Want to try some of my chili, big boy?"

Jimmy had never considered that Idabel Grasshopper might show up. A lifelong member of Hogshooter Indian Baptist Church, she was a long way from home. But maybe she'd heard he was coming. Damn that preacher.

He said, "I think maybe your chili's too hot for me."

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Idabel Grasshopper giggled and Jimmy made a note to kick himself in the ass, next time he felt limber enough, for encouraging her. As far back as he could remember, her two big goals in life had been to get Jimmy Hominy into the church and into her bed—preferably, but not necessarily, in that order. Change of life hadn't helped; in the last few years she'd just gotten holier and hornier. She'd also picked up about forty pounds and a Don Ameche mustache.

"And here you are at a gospel singing," she said. "Praise the Lord!"

"I just came to listen to the music," Jimmy mumbled. *Damn* that preacher.

"The music," she said severely, "doesn't mean a thing without the spirit. Now in Philippians two-ten it says—"

But Jimmy was no longer even pretending to listen. Over the top of her Brillo-pad perm, he had spotted the Sparrowhawk brothers coming across the parking area.

He hadn't seen either of them in years but they hadn't improved any in the ugly department. Luther, the older brother, seemed to have a few more facial scars, but otherwise there wasn't much difference between them; just a couple of lumpy, overgrown Indians, nearly as big as Jimmy, with hooky noses and eyes set way too close together.

All of a sudden, right at the edge of the grass, they stopped so hard they practically bounced.

Jimmy Hominy watched, ignoring Idabel, as they looked at each other and then tried again to cross the medicine line he had laid down. It was like watching a pair of big stupid birds flying into a plate-glass window.

Finally, looking pissed off, they turned and stomped back across the parking lot and got into a big pickup truck. A minute later they blasted out of the church grounds, throwing gravel. The crash of bad gear changes drifted back on the breeze as their lights disappeared up the road.

The preacher was standing over by the edge of the trees, smoking his pipe. "Did you see that?" he said as Jimmy came up. "Whatever you did, thanks—"

"Never mind that," Jimmy told him. "I'm going to kill you. That hooting sound you hear is the owl calling your name."

The preacher laughed softly. "Idabel's still after you?"

" 'Big boy,' " Jimmy said, shuddering. "Nobody's called me that since Saigon."

Up on stage the Kingfisher Family were getting down with "Orphan Child":

"Ja-ga-wi-yu-hi hna-quu ta-ti-hnu-ga di-je-na-sv
Ju-no-ye-ni-quu de-hi-ni-yv-se-sdi ni-go-hi-lv."

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"Come on," the preacher said. "Let's get some coffee. Going to be a long night."

The night did take its time passing. Singers took their turns on stage, alone or by duets and trios and quartets, and most were at least reasonably good. Even the ones that weren't came off sounding fairly decent, thanks to the backup. Homer Ninekiller and Dwight Badwater had been playing at gospel singings for twenty or thirty years, Homer with his old Les Paul Gibson electric and Dwight with his even older Martin D-28 Dreadnought flattop, and they were good enough to fill in the holes for the most raggedy-assed group. The kid on bass wasn't in their class but he was okay, keeping up a steady boom-boom and not trying to show off.

The audience applauded and occasionally shouted *amen* or *praise the Lord* and now and then wandered off to the tables for pie and coffee. Little kids ran here and there chasing lightning bugs or just grabassing around, till at last the night got too long for them and they fell asleep in their mothers' laps or in the back seats of cars.

Jimmy got himself a folding chair and found a place under a big oak tree where he could keep an eye on everything. He still wasn't convinced it was over with the Sparrowhawks. It had been too easy and those two were known for their blind-mule stubbornness. But the hours rolled by and there was no further sign of them. When Jimmy's watch showed midnight he felt sure this would be the time something would happen, but nothing did.

The preacher appeared out of the shadows. "Having a good time, Jimmy? I am, now I don't have to worry about the Sparrowhawks."

Jimmy grunted. It was now well after twelve by his watch and he was starting to think nothing was going to happen after all, but he still wasn't ready to admit it.

On stage the musicians were into an instrumental break while the next singing group was called. Homer Ninekiller was doing amazing things to "He Will Set Your Fields On Fire" and Dwight Badwater and the kid in the Seminole jacket were loping right along with him. "*Asv*," the preacher said as they finished.

"Picked that one and sent it home naked," Jimmy agreed. "Who's on next?"

"The Heaven-Bound Disciples."

"Shit."

"Please," the preacher said reprovingly. "This *is* the Lord's service."

"Sorry," Jimmy said. "But I bet that's pretty much the Lord's opinion too."

The Heaven-Bound Disciples consisted of a loudmouthed preacher

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named Mason Littlebird, his incredibly fat wife, and their big-knockered teenage daughter. None of them could sing worth a damn and Mason Littlebird had a habit of preaching windy sermons, "witnessing" he called it, between songs. Watching Mavis Littlebird clambering up the ladder to the stage—the truck was already tilted over on its shocks from her mother's weight—Jimmy decided this was a good time to take care of some increasingly urgent business.

"See you," he told the preacher. "Got to visit the BIA office."

There was somebody already inside the outhouse when Jimmy got there. He shrugged and stepped off into the trees. Fine Indian he'd be if he couldn't even take a pee in the woods.

He gave a post-oak a good soaking down, hearing Mason Littlebird's voice blaring through the trees: "And I used to be a sinner, a-men, I drank and gambled, praise the Lord, yes and I sinned with women, thank you Jesus—" Zipping up, he walked back out of the woods and managed to get himself a foam cup of black coffee without being spotted by Idabel Grasshopper, who was gazing toward the stage with a look of holy joy. Maybe, Jimmy thought hopefully, she's getting the hots for Mason instead of me. Amen, praise the Lord, *and* thank you Jesus if she does.

He was finishing his coffee when it all began to happen.

The Heaven-Bound Disciples were into a long depressing song about sinners going to Hell—the words in English, of course, none of them spoke Cherokee even though Mason claimed to be a full-blood—when all at once there was a Godawful racket from the speakers and then silence except for the voices of the Disciples, trailing off uncertainly as they turned to stare.

Homer Ninekiller and the bass player bent over the silent amplifiers. From the look on their faces Jimmy guessed the breakdown was a major one. He could smell the kind of smoke you got when electric things died.

He felt no serious concern. This sort of thing was always happening at these affairs; the cheap amplifier systems, that were all most Indians could afford, broke down all the time. And, as far as he was concerned, this time was as good as any. Anything that shut the Littlebirds up was okay with him.

Dwight Badwater, though, was speaking to the Disciples, who were still staring at the dead speakers. After a minute they turned back around, while Dwight went into a flatpicking introduction, and began again to sing. Their voices were thin and weak without amplification, but they tried, while Dwight Badwater's big flattop boomed behind them. There was a burst of applause.

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Then, with a sickening cracking sound, the bridge tore clear off Dwight Badwater's guitar. It happened too fast to see; one second Dwight was sitting there playing big mellow acoustic chords and the next he was grabbing his right wrist, bloody where the lashing strings had cut it, and looking down in disbelief at the splintered top of that beautiful old Martin.

Jimmy Hominy felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. Yet something made him turn his head, just at that moment, and when he did he forgot all about old friends and ruined guitars.

Half a dozen men in white suits were coming across the parking area. Behind them, two more men were getting out of a big white van that practically glowed in the dim light. It was too far and too dark to make out faces or details, except for the man in the lead, but that was okay because he was the only one Jimmy was really looking at.

Not that he was anything special to look at; he was just an average-sized man—maybe a little on the short and slender side—in a fancy white suit. But Jimmy Hominy took one look at him, checked his watch again, and shook his head in disgust. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "Forgot about daylight saving time."

The stranger crossed the parking ground with a quick sure step that was almost a swagger. When he came to the edge of the grassy area he stopped. The others coming up behind him stopped too.

He stood for a moment studying the ground at his feet. Then his head came up and turned, slowly, until he was looking straight in Jimmy Hominy's direction; and he smiled, a wide flash of very white teeth, and stepped forward again. Along the ground on either side of him was a bright blue flash, too fast and too small to see unless you were looking for it, where the medicine line had been.

Jimmy Hominy felt something with cold feet walking up his backbone. As far as he knew there was only one person in all Creation who could do that. Well, okay, two, but he was fairly certain this wasn't the other one.

The other suits followed their leader through the break in the medicine circle, walking single file, none of them looking down or around. Behind them, shuffling along with hunched shoulders, came Luther and Bobby Sparrowhawk.

Jimmy started to move, to head the strangers off—to tell the truth he didn't know what the hell he meant to do—but Idabel Grasshopper came up beside him and grabbed his arm. "There you are," she said in the way of somebody finding a missing possession. "Look, who's that? Don't they look handsome."

The strangers were standing beside the stage now, while the leader spoke to Eli Blackbird, who nodded and then climbed up on the truck, raising his hands for attention. "Good news," the preacher shouted over

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the growing noise of the crowd. "We've got a new group here, and they've brought their own equipment. Soon as they get set up, we'll go on with the singing."

The white suits were already trooping back to their van. With amazing speed and efficiency they began carrying things from the van—speakers, amplifiers, cased instruments—and setting them up on stage. Meanwhile the Sparrowhawk brothers took seats on the front row and sat there side by side like a couple of mean toads, staring straight ahead and not speaking to anybody.

"See, Jimmy?" Idabel Grasshopper sighed. "Just when everything was going wrong, the Lord sent us help. That's how it is, if you have faith—"

By the time Jimmy got loose the strangers were all set up and standing ready on stage. The preacher stepped up to one of the shiny new microphones they had brought. "All right." His voice boomed out through the big speakers and rumbled off through the woods. "Let's all give a big welcome to—" He checked a piece of paper in his hand. "Brother Seth Abadon, and a group called Maranatha!"

The crowd applauded and amenned. The preacher got off the stage, the strangers took a step forward—all together and on the same foot, like a half-time drill team—and the music began:

"Oh people, get ready,
Oh people, get ready,
Oh people, get ready,
He's coming to take you away."

Jimmy Hominy had worked his way up to the front now, and he put his hand to his back pocket, to the little pouch of extra-special tobacco he had brought along in case things got rough. But then, remembering how the stranger had broken that power circle without so much as a song or a word, he changed his mind. That tobacco was strong enough to knock seven witches on their asses at a range of seven miles, on the far side of seven mountains, with one good puff; but he had a feeling that using it against this well-dressed joker would be like trying to stop a buffalo with a blowgun.

So he let his hand fall empty to his side, and went over and stood under the big tree again, where he could study the men in the white suits. He'd never seen anything like them.

And yet there was nothing weird or shocking in their appearance. In fact the peculiar thing about them was that there *wasn't* anything peculiar about any of them. Even the most ordinary-looking people had various little details—a crooked nose, a big chin, a mole—that marked them as who they were; even white people, who did tend to look pretty much alike to Jimmy Hominy, had their own faces if you really looked. But

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these gents, except for their leader, might have come off some kind of assembly line. They were so exactly the same size and build that they could have swapped their snazzy Western-cut white suits around at random and all ended up with just as neat a fit, and Jimmy wouldn't have been a bit surprised to find out they were able to switch arms and legs and heads as well.

That was speaking of the five regular members of Maranatha. The leader—Seth Abadon, if that was his name; Jimmy figured he was also known by many other names—was something else. And that was screwy, too, because he didn't look all that different from the others, in any way you could put your finger on. He was a little shorter and more lightly built, and his suit fit him just a little better, but that was all . . . but he stood out on that stage like a timber wolf in a pack of stray mutts. Something in the way he stood, in the way he held his head; whatever it was, nobody in the world would have needed more than a single glance to know which of the strangers was The Man.

At Jimmy's side the preacher said, "Isn't it great? A real professional group showing up at a little country singing like this, we really lucked out tonight."

Jimmy snorted. "What's a bunch of *yonegs* doing here?"

"You think they're white?" The preacher sounded surprised. "They look Indian to me."

Actually, you couldn't tell. The strangers' faces seemed to shift somehow in the yellowish light; it was like looking through a car windshield in a rainstorm, or trying to read with a pair of those cheap glasses off the rack at Family Dollar Store. They wouldn't come into focus; they looked sort of Indian, and then they looked sort of white, and now and then Jimmy caught flickering glimpses of other things he didn't even want to identify.

"Anyway," the preacher said, "who cares? Just listen to that music!"

Jimmy was listening; it wasn't exactly something you could ignore. Whoever these people were, they had brought some serious equipment: gleaming high-tech-looking amplifiers with lots of knobs and switches and colored lights, black studio-grade microphones, and great big speakers like the ones at the rock concert Jimmy had once attended with his grandson. One, standing right behind Brother Seth Abadon up by the truck cab, was easily the biggest speaker Jimmy had ever seen; the damn thing looked to be bigger than his trailer's front door.

The music surged and rolled from the speakers, not blasting nosebleed-loud like at the rock concert, but in a soft pulsing flood that soaked right through your skin and blended with your breathing and your heartbeat. There was no rejecting it; it got to you, like it or not, and Jimmy

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kept catching himself tapping a foot or nodding his head with the rhythm. Though why this was so he couldn't understand; it certainly wasn't the words of the song, which were simple-headed to the point of childishness:

"People, have you heard the call,
Going out to one and all?
Listen and you'll know it's true
He is coming after you."

—they sang, in intricate high-rising harmonies, so tight it was impossible to tell who was singing which part. They had fine voices, too, clear and strong and dead true, never the faintest sourness or roughness to mar that amazing flow. If anything they were too perfect; the effect was that of drinking distilled water—so pure there was no flavor, nothing really *there.*

But the singing was only a part, and maybe the lesser part, of Maranatha's sound. The vocals rode along atop an elaborate structure of complex chords and driving runs laid down by the instruments: two rhythm guitars, bass, keyboard—the kind that hung around the player's neck rather than standing on legs—a sort of tambourine, and Brother Seth Abadon himself on lead guitar. None of the instruments were of any familiar make; the shapes, in fact, were a little disturbing if you looked closely.

The rhythm guitars chonged and whopped, the bass thudded, the keyboard wheeped and tootled, the tambourine jingle-jangled, and Brother Seth's white solid-body guitar threaded in and out with graceful ease; and over it all sang the voices of Maranatha:

"Oh brother, get ready,
Oh sister, get ready,
Oh children, get ready,
He's come to take you away."

"Who's taking who where?" Jimmy wondered under his breath. To the preacher he said, "Where are these guys from, anyway?"

There was no answer. Jimmy turned and saw that the preacher was staring wide-eyed and slack-faced in the direction of the stage. His head was nodding, his shoulders moved rhythmically, and he shifted his weight from foot to foot in time with the music. He didn't respond when Jimmy spoke his name; he didn't even appear to notice when Jimmy jabbed an elbow into his short ribs.

"The hell," Jimmy said, out loud and not caring who heard him.

Doing some staring of his own, he looked out over the crowd. Sure enough, all the faces he could see were looking toward the stage with the same glazed-and-dazed expression, and a lot of people had begun to sway

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from side to side in their seats or where they stood. More were standing now, he noticed, than had been before. As he watched, others rose slowly to their feet.

The music swelled and rose, and there was something new, a hungry triumphant note such as you might hear in the voices of a dog pack about to tree a coon. Jimmy turned back around and saw Brother Seth Abadon was looking at him.

—*Who are you?*

The words sounded in Jimmy's mind, not his ears. On stage, Brother Seth's mouth had not stopped singing, or smiling, but Jimmy had no doubt who had spoken. He wasn't particularly startled; he had known several old medicine men who could do that trick of talking to you inside your head.

He said, "I'm that tall Indian you always hear about things being ass-high to. Who wants to know?"

Still singing and smiling, still playing his white guitar, Brother Seth tipped his head to one side.—*Interesting,* said the voice in Jimmy's head. *I didn't expect to find one of your kind here.*

Down front, where he had been standing ever since the amplifier breakdown, Mason Littlebird took an unsteady step toward the stage.

—*This is not your place,* the voice said. *This does not concern you. Go away.*

"Up yours," Jimmy said, and folded his arms.

Brother Seth shrugged.—*Then stay out of the way. I won't answer for your safety.*

The white guitar's neck swung down past horizontal as Brother Seth began a long riff, up through the scale and slipping in and out of the minors. Dense chords crashed from the speakers as the others followed, modulating to a higher key.

Jimmy saw that something strange was happening to the front of the huge speaker that stood behind Brother Seth. The black rectangular surface no longer looked solid; it looked more like a hole, an opening into some place of absolute darkness.

"Come to take you away, come to take you away,
Come along, come along, he's come to take you away—"

Jimmy felt a rush of dizziness, and something tugging him forward. He shut his eyes and clutched at the little leather bag, no bigger than his thumb, that hung around his neck. Almost immediately he felt the four things inside begin to move against his palm, and a moment later the dizzy feeling fell away. He opened his eyes and looked up at the smiling face of Brother Seth Abadon.

"All right, you son of a bitch," Jimmy Hominy said. "*All* right."

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* * *

Both the Mercury's rear doors were jammed shut and he had to crawl in and reach over the back of the front seat to get the oversized guitar case out of the back. He dragged it out of the car and laid it carefully on the fender and undid the snaps and lifted the lid, saying certain words in a language older than Cherokee.

Inside the case was a guitar that was like no other guitar in the world.

For one thing, there was the sheer outrageous size of it. Back in the fifties, when Jimmy's brother Clyde had first begun to play roadhouse gigs with it, people said that that crazy Indian Clyde Hominy had built himself a guitar as big as a doghouse bass. That was a little bit of an exaggeration, but it was at least as big as one of those Mexican walking basses, that mariachi players call *guitarron.*

For another thing, the body wasn't wood, but steel. In fact it looked a little like a giant version of the old steel-bodied National that the black bluesmen used to favor so highly. And then there was that neck, wide as Route 66, and that extra string. . . .

But those were merely the things anybody could see at a glance. What made the big guitar truly unique was known to no living man but Jimmy Hominy: the steel of its body had been cut from the car Hank Williams was riding in when he died.

Oh, there was a car somewhere in Tennessee that was supposed to be the Hank Williams death car, but it was a fake. Clyde Hominy had been home from Korea only a couple of months when they broadcast the news that Hank was dead, and he had taken off immediately eastward, hopping freights and riding boxcars in the freezing January nights, till he got to Oak Hill, West Virginia. He had stolen the big white Cadillac right out of the county impound yard, where it was waiting for the legalities to be settled, and had driven it all the way back to Oklahoma without once being stopped or spotted, protected by the special medicine given him by a great-uncle who had in his day been the top horse thief in the Indian Territory.

He had hidden the car in the woods, unsure what to do with it, until one night Hank had appeared to him in a dream and told him. Then he had boosted a welding rig from a bridge construction site, and cut and welded the huge box and its resonator from the heavy steel of the Cadillac's doors and fenders, carving the neck from wood from a lightning-struck walnut tree that stood in a hundred-year-old Indian graveyard near Lost City; and when he was done he had run the remains of the car off a cliff above the deepest hole in the Arkansas River, and had taken the guitar and hit the road.

Nobody but Clyde had ever been allowed to play it—that hadn't been hard to enforce, since few men even cared to try and lift it—until that

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night in '58 when Clyde, gunned down on a Tulsa street by a drunken and Indian-hating white cop, had passed the guitar and its secret on to his little brother as he lay dying in the hospital.

Jimmy stood for a minute looking down at the guitar, running his fingers over a roughly welded seam; Clyde had been after sound, not looks. Then he picked the guitar up, slung the buffalo-hide strap over his neck and shoulder, fitted the slide—not the usual glass bottleneck, but a four-inch section of twelve-gauge barrel cut from a sawed-off shotgun that had once belonged to Pretty Boy Floyd, and never mind *that* story—to his ring finger, stuck his pipe between his teeth and lit it, and headed back toward the stage.

When he got there he saw right away that there was no time left to screw around. Half the people were on their feet now and all of them were swaying in unison from side to side, their faces absolutely blank and their eyes huge. Mason Littlebird was at the foot of the metal ladder that went up to the stage, and a long line of men and women had formed behind him—Jimmy saw Idabel Grasshopper in there, and Eli Blackbird, and the Sparrowhawk brothers—all moving with the same strange slow step, as if wading in knee-deep water. The music had grown higher and the beat stronger, and the blackness within the enormous speaker was now lit by a faint red glow.

Jimmy shoved Mason Littlebird aside and went up the ladder fast, no hands. As his feet hit the truck bed he slammed a horny thumb across the strings of Clyde's guitar, making an ugly dissonant crash. He slashed out a wailing slide chord like a jail full of busted whores, walked down through the basses with first and second finger, and screamed back up on the high strings with the slide clear on top of the box. It was as crude and violent as an attack with a broken bottle.

And as effective. The wild riff cut through Maranatha's slick sound—it shouldn't have been able to do that, not even this guitar, not against amplified instruments, but a lot of impossible things were going down tonight—and disrupted the seamless harmony, wrenched the progression just the least bit off track, tangled itself around the pretty melody and turned it into something slightly but definitely nasty. Down front, Mason Littlebird paused with one foot on the ladder, and the people behind him stopped their slow-motion march. The rest of the audience continued their rhythmic swaying, but the motion had become a little uneven.

Brother Seth kept playing. He kept smiling, too, as he turned to look at Jimmy Hominy, but it wasn't the same smile as before.

—*So? You challenge me?*

"You got it," Jimmy said without taking the pipe from his mouth.

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—*You have no idea what you're doing. Look!*

The nearest microphone turned suddenly into a giant rattlesnake, standing on its tail. It rushed at Jimmy, striking at his face, yellow venom dripping from long curving fangs.

And Jimmy laughed, thinking maybe this was going to work after all. Brother Seth Abadon might be—well, who he was—but obviously he didn't know everything. He didn't even know what half the Indians present could have told him: that *inada* was Jimmy Hominy's personal power animal and spirit guide. Jimmy said a couple of words and the rattlesnake slithered up his arm and wrapped itself companionably around his neck and went to sleep. He blew a long stream of smoke that condensed itself into a great monster of a rattlesnake, twice the size of the first, that reared up in front of Brother Seth.

"Mine's longer than yours," Jimmy pointed out.

Brother Seth looked from one rattlesnake to another.—*Interesting.* He made a gesture with his little finger and both snakes vanished. *Very well, then—*

He nodded to the other suits. Immediately Maranatha began laying down a quick-stepping two-four rhythm: no tune, just a steady repetition of a single major chord by rhythm guitars and keyboard, while the bass looped again and again through the same three-notes-and-rest phrase. It was a monotonous but compelling sound, holding the ear like the drone of a bagpipe.

Jimmy glanced out over the crowd and saw that the swaying had stopped. Everything, in fact, had stopped; people sat or stood in place, even those in obviously uncomfortable or off-balance positions—half out of their seats, or about to step off on one foot—and nobody, nothing, moved. They could have been a collection of window dummies.

—*Forget them.* The voice had an impatient edge. *They will keep for as long as this takes.*

Without warning Brother Seth took off on a long spectacular guitar solo, picking out shower after shower of high brilliant notes, then dropping down to the bass strings to turn the showers into thunderstorms, and back up to the little frets for a display of lightning. It was a fantastic performance, and when it seemed the elaborate structure couldn't carry any more, Brother Seth spun a dazzling ribbon of sixteenth notes to wrap it all up like a Christmas package.

Whereupon Jimmy Hominy proceeded to play the whole thing back to him, note for note, but adding all sorts of extra little ornamental figures and grace notes, playing it all with just the first two fingers of his left hand. At the end, just for prickishness, he tacked on the opening bars of the theme from *Gilligan's Island.*

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"Not bad," he said. "Know any more like that? I could sure use the practice."

And that was how it went for a long time, while the stars wheeled overhead and a small-hours ground mist crept out of the woods and wetted the grass. Brother Seth would build something marvelous, only to have Jimmy Hominy knock it to pieces and then kick the pieces off the stage. Very soon there was no smile at all on Brother Seth's face and what there was instead was not a good thing to see.

He played a moaning dirgelike blues, so mournful and lonesome and crying-about-your-mama sad that several owls in the trees nearby committed suicide by diving headfirst into the ground. Jimmy shut that down by interrupting with mocking puppy whines and hound-dog howls that he made with the slide. Brother Seth switched to a weird hypnotic modal number, like those ragas from India you heard in the Sixties. Jimmy picked up the basic line and turned it into a toe-tapping stinky-finger rag, ending up with a deliberately corny *dew-dew-dewdy-yew-dew* straight off *Hee Haw*.

All this time the audience remained frozen where they were, as they were, with never a twitch or blink. Jimmy wondered if they were all right, and whether they could see or hear what was going on. But he didn't wonder much, because the battle with Brother Seth was taking everything he had and it was starting to look as if even that might not be enough.

The sound from the speakers changed suddenly to a vicious shriek, hard-edged and merciless as a straight razor, as Brother Seth began a series of string-bending riffs evil enough to make the nastiest heavy-metal player sound like Lawrence Welk. Things without shapes appeared in the air and hung there gibbering at Jimmy Hominy. Flames broke out around him and the guitar in his hand started to smoke. The strings burned his fingers.

Well, he hadn't really expected a fair fight from Brother Seth Abadon. He took care of the immediate problems by puffing at his pipe—it was still burning, hadn't gone out all this while even though he hadn't had a chance to reload it; there were only two other men alive who knew that trick—and calling up a little rain to cool things down. He noticed Brother Seth didn't get wet.

But making rain took energy he didn't have to spare. The truth was, Jimmy Hominy was getting tired. His arms and shoulders ached, his hands were cramping, and his back hurt from the weight of the heavy guitar. Worse, his head was going numb; he was running out of ideas. He could still keep in there awhile longer, but he felt very doubtful about the final outcome.

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At his side, a voice he hadn't heard in over forty years said, "In trouble, *chooch?*"

Clyde was standing there, grinning at him; a wispy, shadowy Clyde—Jimmy could see right through him—even more wasted-looking than when he was alive. Jimmy said, "*Din'dahnvtli!* What, uh, how—"

"No time." Clyde's voice was thin and scratchy, barely audible through the racket Brother Seth was making. "Here."

Clyde's hand came out and touched the guitar's tuning knobs. Jimmy couldn't see how such an insubstantial figure could hope to move material objects, but Clyde still had power over that guitar. Whang boing chong, he retuned the top three strings to a strange straight sixth, like nothing Jimmy had ever heard before. "Try it now."

It took Jimmy only a few seconds to get the hang of the new tuning and an idea of its possibilities. By then Clyde was looking even more washed-out.

"So that's what you do with that seventh string," Jimmy said. "I never did know."

"I'd of told you," Clyde said, "but I was sort of leaky at the time. Listen, you got to quit counterpunching and go after him. Way you're going at this, he's wearing you down. Before long you'll start to lose it." Clyde shook his head. "You don't want to know what happens then, *chooch.* Get him now, while you still got a chance."

He started to drift away. His feet didn't quite touch the stage. Jimmy said, "Don't go, Clyde. Stay with me."

"Can't, *chooch.* I'm already gonna catch hell for this." He glanced at Brother Seth, who was watching him with a bad expression. "And I do mean catch hell. . . ."

He drifted over to the enormous black speaker. There he stopped and looked back. "Oh, yeah. He can't play augmented chords. They make him crazy."

"How do you know so much about him?"

"Shit, *chooch.*" Clyde's laugh had been spooky enough in life and it hadn't been improved by death. "Who do you think taught him to play?"

He stepped into the black rectangle and vanished. Just like that.

—*Your brother. I should have known.* Brother Seth was looking at Jimmy in a new way. *You know, I could use a man like you. You'd be worth an infinite number of*—he flicked a contemptuous look down at the Sparrowhawk brothers, still rigid like everybody else. *I would make it worth your while.*

"Full benefit package?" Jimmy said dryly.

—*Among other things, you could talk with your brother whenever you wished.*

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"Yeah," Jimmy said, "but if I went to work for you he wouldn't talk to me."

More words sounded inside his head, but Jimmy Hominy was no longer listening. He was playing guitar.

He had no name for what he was playing. He had never played anything like it before, even in his imagination; and he knew as he played that he would never be able to do it again. It was a thing only of that moment, as one-time and singular as a snowflake or a murder.

It began with a few bars of almost aimless riffing up and down the frets, exploring the new tuning, staking out scales. It burst suddenly into a chopped-and-lowered version of "Blackberry Rag"—that was for Clyde, it had been his signature tune—and then slid sideways into a wailing "Third Stone From the Sun." That turned somehow into a peyote-ceremony song learned from a brother-in-law who was in the Native American Church; while he was visiting six-tone country, Jimmy threw in part of a tune the locals used to sing in Vietnam. He came back nearer home with a sobbing ay-ay-ay-ay *ranchera* heard one night on the radio, floating up from Mexico, and then stepped off into a quick "Billy In The Low Ground," using the slide to make the big guitar sound like a dobro. That gave way to something that sounded vaguely Cajun and could have been, Jimmy having briefly driven a truck out of Bossier City, but might have been French Canadian since he had also spent a long-ago summer playing at a club in Montreal and trying to get into a certain Mohawk waitress's pants.

Needless to say, he put in lots of augmented chords.

There was Django and Blind Lemon and Charlie in there, and Les and Merle and Jimi and some of every other crazy bastard who ever picked up a guitar. And, of course, there was plenty of Clyde Hominy. Now and then Jimmy had the feeling it was the guitar that was playing him.

But there was much more going on than a mere blending of odds and ends. Out of the wild mixture something else was growing, stretching itself and gradually taking over; call it music or medicine or magic, there was now a new thing that had never been before. . . .

And Brother Seth Abadon, who had been trying to get in with an occasional frustrated lick of his own, suddenly gestured Maranatha to silence, and unslung his own guitar and let it dangle by the neck from his left hand, and stood there listening, unmoving as the audience, while Jimmy finished. Because—Jimmy understood it somehow, looking at him—for all his abilities and powers and attributes, creation just wasn't a part of what Brother Seth was about. His talents lay in the other direction.

At the end, when Jimmy had wound up with a fast fingerpicking run, Brother Seth smiled once again.—*Well. You seem to have made your point.*

He nodded toward the still-frozen crowd.—*Not, of course, that it mat-*

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ters. This pathetic handful of aboriginal relics? Less than a trifle, in the great game.

The smile widened.—*And I'll get most of them anyway, in the end.*

"You went to a lot of trouble," Jimmy said, "for a trifle."

Brother Seth shrugged.—*I thought this would be amusing. As it has been, though in unexpected ways, thanks to you. One does require one's diversions.*

"You got some damn mean ways of getting your laughs."

—*I?* Brother Seth's eyebrows rose. *What about my worthy opponent, whom these fools adore? He grows bored and mountains fall, seas rise, stars explode. Whole worlds and their inhabitants vanish, usually in painful ways. And you think me cruel?*

"Wouldn't surprise me that's so," Jimmy said. "But then I never took much stock in either of you."

—*Interesting.* Brother Seth seemed to use that word a lot. *You refuse to serve me. Yet neither do you serve my adversary.*

"Guess I'm just not servant material."

—*Ah, yes.* Brother Seth shook his head. For just a second he looked tired. *I said much the same, a very long time ago. . . .*

He fell silent, looking off past Jimmy at nothing in particular. Jimmy realized the sky in the east was getting light.

—*Still.* Brother Seth waved a hand at the crowd. *I had a deal.*

"Not with me you didn't. Not with them, either."

—*And yet one hates to leave empty-handed.*

"Take what's yours," Jimmy said. "No problem."

Brother Seth crooked a finger. Down in front of the stage the Sparrowhawk brothers began moving, walking stiffly and clumsily—actually it wasn't all that different from their usual gait—back to the rear of the truck. They climbed the metal ladder and crossed the stage, not looking at anything or anybody. As Jimmy watched, Luther Sparrowhawk stepped into the front of the huge black speaker and was gone. A moment later Bobby Sparrowhawk followed.

—*And so much for that.*

Brother Seth snapped his fingers and Maranatha began packing away their instruments and clearing their equipment off the stage, moving with the same brisk efficiency as before. In hardly any time they had loaded everything back into the white van and were climbing aboard. The white van pulled out of the parking area, making no sound whatever, and disappeared down the road in the direction of Fort Gibson.

At that exact moment the bright disk of the sun cracked the eastern horizon. Immediately the crowd in front of the stage began to move and mill about, heads turning this way and that, arms stretching. There was

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a low murmuring and a few voices raised in vague surprise, nothing more. A baby started crying.

Jimmy got off the stage before anybody could notice him up there. As he reached the ground Idabel Grasshopper came up and clutched his arm. "Jimmy! Where'd you get to?" She looked up at the empty stage. "What happened to those nice men? I was just enjoying their music so much—"

Suddenly, on the front row, old Nettie Blackfox—nobody knew how old, over ninety for sure and blind as a rock for the last twenty—stood up and began to sing:

"Ga-do de-jv-ya-dv-hne-li Ji-sa?
O-ga-je-li ja-gv-wi-yu-hi—"

Others joined in, rising to their feet if they weren't already standing, raising their voices in the old hymn that had come all the way from the eastern homeland, that the people had sung on the Trail of Tears while a third of the Cherokees in the world died:

"O-ga-hli-ga-hli yv-ha-quu-ye-no
Jo-gi-la-wi-sdv-ne-di-yi."

Jimmy found himself singing too, coming in on bass, while Idabel's voice beside him went for the highs; one thing you had to give Idabel, she could sure as hell sing:

O-ga-je-li-ga . . . . . ja-gv-wi-yu-hi . . . . . (o-ga-je-li-ga) (ja-gv-wi-yu-hi)
Ja-je-li-ga-no . . . . . ja-gv-wi-yu-hi . . . . . (ja-je-li-ga-no) (ja-gv-wi-yu-hi)

—while the sun continued to climb above the trees and somewhere a redbird began warming up for a song of his own.

After the singing ended Eli Blackbird climbed up onto the truck long enough for a quick closing prayer, saying the words almost mechanically, occasionally pausing and shaking his head. After the amen he climbed slowly back down and made his way through the crowd to the parking lot, where Jimmy Hominy was already standing beside the Mercury, putting the big seven-string guitar back in its case.

"Boy," the preacher said, "I think I must have dozed off there for a while. I didn't even notice when our guests left. Wish I'd thanked them for coming."

He watched as Jimmy snapped the case shut. "I hate to admit it," he added, "but I missed your part, too. Sorry." He looked Jimmy up and down. "From the look of you, you've been playing to beat the Devil."

Jimmy closed his eyes. "Don't say that, *chooch*," he said softly. "Don't say that. . . ." ●

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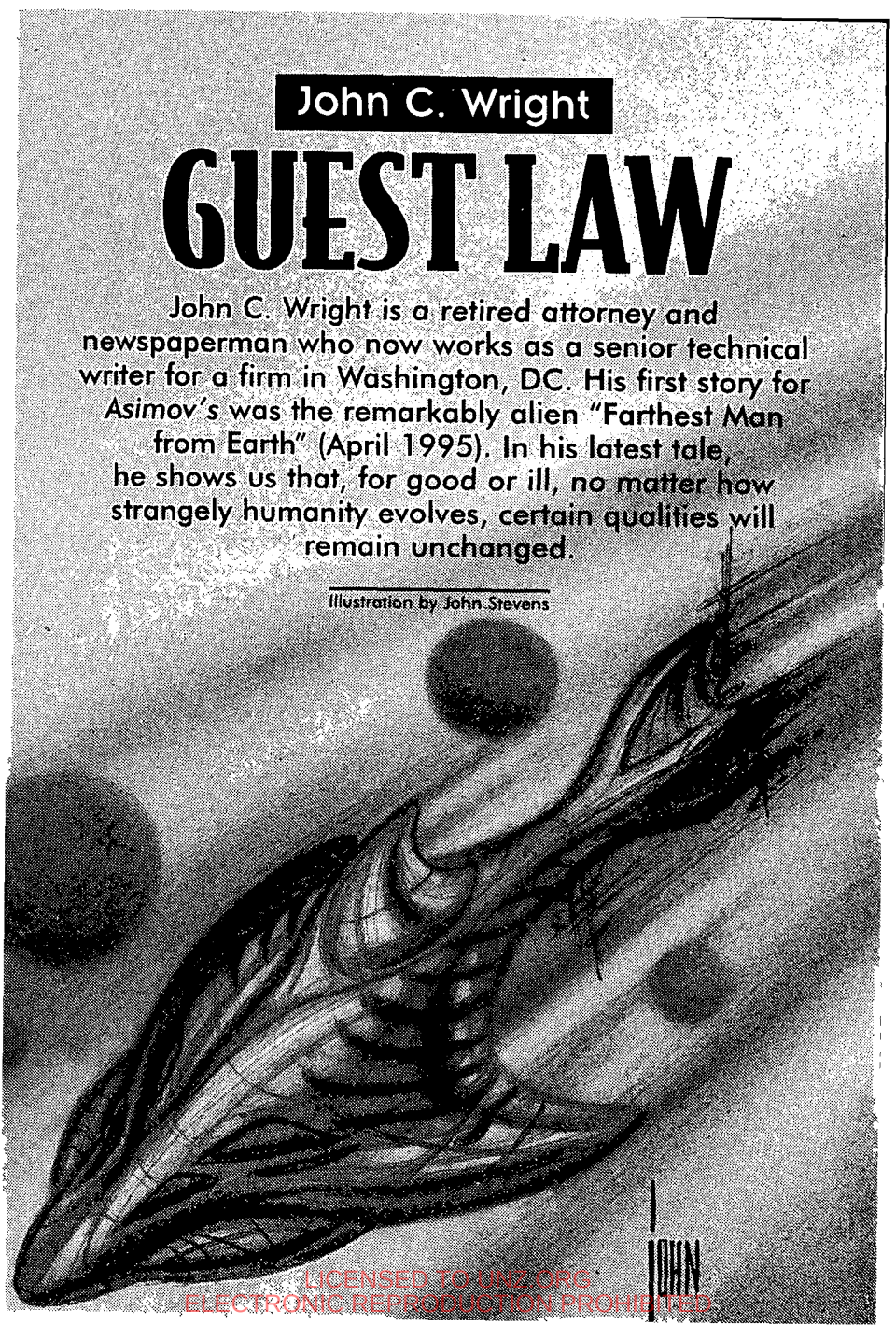
John C. Wright

GUEST LAW

John C. Wright is a retired attorney and newspaperman who now works as a senior technical writer for a firm in Washington, DC. His first story for *Asimov's* was the remarkably alien "Farthest Man from Earth" (April 1995). In his latest tale, he shows us that, for good or ill, no matter how strangely humanity evolves, certain qualities will remain unchanged.

Illustration by John Stevens



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The night of deep space is endless and empty and dark. There is nothing behind which to hide. But ships can be silent, if they are slow.

The noble ship *Procrustes* was silent as a ghost. She was black-hulled, and ran without beacons or lights. She was made of anti-radar alloys and smooth ceramics, shark-finned with panels meant to diffuse waste-heat slowly, and tiger-striped with electronic webs meant to guide certain frequencies around the hull without rebounding.

If she ever were seen, a glance would show that she was meant to be slow. Her drive was fitted with baffle upon baffle, cooling the exhaust before it was expelled, a dark drive, non-radioactive, silent as sprayed mist. Low energy in the drive implied low thrust. Further, she had no centrifuge section, nor did she spin. This meant that her crew were lightweights, their blood and bones degenerated or adapted to microgravity, not the sort who could tolerate high boosts.

This did not mean *Procrustes* was not a noble ship. Warships can be slow; only their missiles need speed.

And so it was silently, slowly, that *Procrustes* approached the stranger's cold vessel.

"We are gathered, my gentlemen, to debate whether this new ship here viewed is noble, or whether she is unarmed; and, if so, whether and how the guest law applies. It pleases us to hear you employ the second level of speech; for this is a semi-informal occassion, and briefer honorifics we permit."

The captain, as beautiful and terrifying as something from a children's Earth-story, floated nude before the viewing well. The bridge was a cylinder of gloom, with only control-lights winking like constellations, the viewing well shining like a full moon.

The captain made a gesture with her fan toward Smith and spoke: "Engineer, you do filth-work . . ." (by which she meant manual labor) ". . . which makes you familiar with machines." (She used the term "familiar" because it simply was not done to say a lowlife had "knowledge" or "expertise.") "It would amuse us to hear your conclusions touching and concerning the stranger's ship."

Smith was never allowed high and fore to the bridge, except when he was compelled to go, as he was now. His hands had been turned off at the wrists, since lowlifes should not touch controls.

Smith was in terror of the captain, but loved her too, since she was the only highlife who called smiths by their old title. The captain was always polite, even to tinkers or drifters or bondsman.

She had not even seemed to notice when Smith had hooked one elbow around one of the many guy-wires that webbed the dark long cylinder of the bridge. Some of the officers and knights who floated near the captain had turned away or snorted with disgust when he had clasped that rope.

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It was a foot-rope, meant for toes, not a hand rope. But Smith's toes were not well formed, not coordinated. He had not been born a lightweight.

Smith was as drab as a hairless monkey next to the captain's vavasors and carls, splendid in their head-to-toe tattoos which displayed heraldries and victory-emblems. These nobles all kept their heads pointed along the captain's axis (an old saying ran: "the captain's head is always up!"), whereas Smith was offset 90 degrees clockwise, legs straight, presenting a broad target. (This he did for the same reason a man under acceleration would bow or kneel; a posture where one could not move well to defend oneself showed submission.)

Smith could see the stranger's ship in the viewing well. She was a slim and handsome craft, built along classical lines, an old, a very old design, of such craftsmanship as was rarely seen today. She was sturdy: built for high accelerations, and proudly bearing long thin structures forward of antennae of a type that indicated fearlessly loud and long-range radar. The engine block was far aft on a very long and graceful insulation shaft. The craft had evidently been made in days when the safety of the engine serfs still was a concern.

Her lines were sleek. (Not, Smith thought secretly, like *Procrustes,* whose low speed and lack of spin allowed her to grow many modules, ugly extrusions, and asymmetric protuberances.)

But the stranger's ship was *old.* Rust, and ice from frozen oxygen, stained the hull where seals had failed.

Yet she still emitted, on radio, the cheerful welcome-code. Merry green-and-red running lights were still lit. Microwave detectors showed radiations from the aft section of her hull, which might still be inhabited, even though the fore sections were cold and silent. Numbers and pictoglyphs flickered on a small screen to one side of the main image, showing telemetry and specific readings.

Smith studied the cylinder's radius and rate of spin. He calculated, and then he said, "Glorious Captain, the lowest deck of the stranger ship has centrifugal acceleration of exactly 32 feet per second per second."

The officers looked eye to eye, hissing with surprise.

The chancellor nodded the gaudy plume that grew from his hair and eyebrows. "This number has ancient significance! Some of the older orders of eremites still use it. They claim that it provides the best weight for our bones. Perhaps this is a religious ship."

One of the younger knights, a thin, dapple-bellied piebald wearing silk speed-wings running from his wrists to ankles, now spoke up: "Great Captain, perhaps she is an Earth ship, inhabited by machine intelligences . . . or ghosts!"

The other nobles opened their fans, and held them in front of their faces. If no derisive smiles were seen, then there was no legal cause for

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duel. The young knight might be illiterate, true, most young knights were, but the long kick-talons he wore on his calves had famous names.

The captain said, "We are more concerned for the stranger's nobility, than her . . . ah . . . origin." There were a few smirks at that. A ship from Earth, indeed! All the old horror-tales made it clear that nothing properly called human was left on Earth, except, perhaps, as pets or specimens of the machines. The Earthmind had never had much interest in space.

The chancellor said, "Those racks forward . . ." (he pointed at what were obviously antennae) ". . . may house weaponry, great Captain, or particle beam weapons, if the stranger has force enough in her drive core to sustain a weapon-grade power flow."

The captain looked toward Smith, "Concerning this ship's energy architecture, Engineer, have you any feelings or intuitions?" She would not ask him for "deductions" or "conclusions," of course.

Smith felt grateful that she had not asked him directly to answer the question; he was not obligated to contradict the chancellor's idiotic assertions. Particle beam indeed! The man had been pointing at a radio dish.

Very polite, the captain, very proper. Politeness was critically important aboard a crowded ship.

The captain was an hermaphrodite. An ancient law forbade captains to marry (or to take lowlife concubines) from crew aboard. The Captain's Wife must be from off-ship, either as gift or conquest or to cement a friendly alliance.

But neither was it proper for the highest of the highlife to go without sexual pleasure, so the captain's body was modified to allow her to pleasure herself.

Her breasts were beautiful—larger, by law, than any woman's aboard—and her skin was adjusted to a royal purple melanin, opaque to certain dangerous radiations. Parallel rows of her skin cells, down her belly and back, had been adjusted to become ornaments of nacre and pearl. Her long legs ended in a second pair of hands, nails worn long to show that she was above manual work. On her wrists and on her calves were the sheaths of her gem-studded blades, and she could fight with all four blades at once.

"Permission to speak to your handmaidens, Glorious Captain?"

"Granted. We will be amused by your antics."

The handmaidens were tied by their hair to the control boards (this was no discomfort in weightlessness, and left their fingers and toes free to manipulate the controls). Some controls were only a few inches from the captain's hand, but she would not touch controls, of course. That was what handmaidens were for.

Smith diffidently suggested to the handmaidens that they focus analytical cameras on several bright stars aft of the motionless ship, and then, as *Procrustes* approached a point where those same stars were

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eclipsed by the emission trail behind the stranger's drive, a spectographic comparison would give clues as to the nature of the exhaust, and hence of the engine structure. Such a scan, being passive, would not betray *Procrustes'* location.

When the analysis had been done as Smith suggested, the result showed an usually high number of parts per billion of hard gamma radiation, as well as traces of high overall electric charge. Smith gave his report, and concluded: "The high numbers of antiprotons through the plume points to a matter-antimatter reaction drive. In properly tuned drives, however, the antiprotons should have been completely consumed, so that their radiation pressure could add to the thrust. Particle decay in the plume indicates many gigaseconds have passed since the main expulsions. There is a cloud of different geometry condensed closer to the drive itself, indicating that the starship has been drifting on low power, her engines idling. But the engines are still active, Glorious Captain. She is not a hulk. She lives."

Smith was smiling when he gave this report, surprised by his own calm lightheartedness. He did not recognize the mood, at first.

It was hope. Often the guest law required the captain to display great munificence. And here was a ship clearly in need of repair, in need of a good smith.

Perhaps the captain would sell his contract to these new people; perhaps there was hope that he could leave *Procrustes,* perhaps find masters less cruel, duties less arduous. (Freedom, a home, a wife, a woman to touch, babies born with his name, a name of his own—these he did not even dream of, anymore).

With a new ship, anything might happen. And even if Smith weren't given away, at least there would be news, new faces, and a banquet. Guest law made such chance meetings a time of celebration.

The captain waved her fan to rotate herself to face her gathered officers. "Opinions, my gentlemen?"

The chancellor said, "With respect, great Captain, we must assume she is of the noble class. If she carries antimatter, she must be armed. She may be a religious ship, perhaps a holy order on errantry or anti-machine crusade. In either case, it would be against the guest law not to answer her hail. As the poet says: 'Ships are few and far in the wide expanse of night; shared cheer, shared news, shared goods, all increase our might.'"

The winged knight said: "With respect, great Captain! If this is a religious ship, then let God or His Wife Gaia look after her! Why should a ship with such potent drives be hanging idle and adrift? No natural reason! There may be plagues aboard, or bad spirits, or machines from Earth. I say pass this one by. The guest law does not require we give hospitality and aid to such unchancy vessels, or ships under curse. Does not

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the poet also say: 'Beware the strangeness of the stranger. Unknown things bring unknown danger'?"

A seneschal whose teeth had been grown into jewels spoke next, "Great Captain, with respect. The guest law allows us to live in the Void. Don't we share air and water and wine? Don't we swap crews and news when we meet? This is a ship unknown, too true, and a strange design. But every ship we meet is new! Einstein makes certain time will age us forever away from any future meetings with any other ship's crew. None of that matters. Captain, my peers, honored officers, listen: either that ship is noble, or she is unarmed. If she is unarmed, she owes us one tenth of her cargo and air and crew. Isn't that fair? Don't we keep the Void clear of pirates and rogues when we find them? But if she is noble, either she has survivors, or she has not. If there are no survivors, then she is a rich prize, and ours by salvage law. Look at the soundness of her structure: her center hull would make a fine new high keep; she is leaking oxygen, she must have air to spare; and the grease-monkey here says she has a drive of great power! Driven by antimatter!"

The vavasors and knights were gazing now with greedy eyes at the image in the viewing well. Antimatter, particularly anti-iron, was the only standard barter metal used throughout the Expanse. Like gold, it was always in demand; unlike radioactives, it did not decay; it was easily identifiable, it was homogenous, it was portable. It was the universal coin, because everyone needed energy.

The seneschal said, "But if she has survivors, great Captain, they must be very weak. And weak ships are often more generous than the guest law requires! More generous than any living man wants to be!"

A ripple of hissing laughter echoed from the circle of nobles. Some of them fondly touched their knives and anchorhooks.

The captain looked as if she were about to chide them for their evil thoughts, but then a sort of cruel masculine look came to her features. Smith was reminded that the womanly parts of her hermaphrodite's body were only present to serve the pleasure of the manly parts.

The captain said, "Good my gentlemen, might there be a noble woman aboard, among the survivors?"

The ship's doctor, an old, wiry man with thin hands and goggle-adapted eyes, laughed breathlessly: "Aye! Captain's in rut and high time she were married, says I! Sad when we had to choke that concubine, back last megasecond when the air-stock got low. Don't you worry, Capt'n! If there be anyone aboard that ship, whatever they is now, I'll make 'em into a woman for you! Make 'em! Even boys get to like it, you know, after you dock 'em a few times, if you got their wombs wired up right to the pleasure center of their brains!"

There was some snickering at that, but the laughter froze when the captain said in her mildest voice: "Good my ship's Surgeon, we are most

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pleased by your counsel, though it is not called for at this time. We remind you that an officer and a gentleman does not indulge in waggish humor or display."

Then she snapped her right fan open and held it overhead for attention. "My herald, radio to the stranger ship with my compliments and tell her to prepare for docking under the guest-law protocols. Fire-control, ready your weapons in case she answers in an ignoble or inhospitable fashion, or if she turns pirate. Quartermaster, ready ample cubic space to take on full supplies."

The nobles looked eye to eye, smiling, hands caressing weapon-hilts, nostrils dilated, smiling with blood-lust at the prospect.

The captain said with mild irony: "The stranger is weak, after all, and may be more generous than guest law or prudence requires. Go, my gentlemen, prepare your battle-dress! Look as haughty as hawks and as proud as peacocks for our guests!"

Their laughter sounded horrid to Smith's ears. He thought of the guest law, and of his hopes, and felt sick.

The captain, as an afterthought, motioned with her fan toward Smith, saying to her handmaid, "And shut down the engineer. We may have need of his aptitudes soon, and we need no loose talk belowdecks the while."

A handmaiden raised a control box and pointed it at Smith, and, before he could summon the courage to plead, a circuit the ship's doctor had put in his spine and brain stem shut off his sensory nerves and motor-control.

Smith wished he had had the chance to beg for his sleep center to be turned on. He hated the hallucinations sensory deprivation brought.

Numb, blind, wrapped in a grey void, Smith tried to sleep.

When Smith slept, he dreamed of home, of his father and mother and many brothers. His native habitat was built up around the resting hulk of the exile-ship *Never Return,* in geosynchronous orbit above an ancient storm system rippling the face of a vast gas giant in the Tau Ceti system.

The habitat had a skyhook made of materials no modern man could reproduce, lowered into the trailing edge of the storm. Here the pressure caused a standing wave, larger than the surface area of most planets, which churned up pressurized metallic hydrogen from the lower atmospheres. The colonists had mined the wave for fuel for passing starships for generations.

In the time of Smith's great-grandfather, the multimillion-year-old storm began to die out. As fuel production failed, the colony grew weak, and the Nevermen were subject to raids. Some came from Oort-cloud nomads, but most were from the inner-system colonists who inhabited the

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asteroidal belts their ancestors had made by pulverizing the subterrestrial planets.

Smith's mother and father had been killed in the raids.

There was no law, no government, to appeal to for aid. Even on old Earth, before the machines, no single government had ever managed to control the many peoples of that one small planet. To dream of government across the Expanse was madness: the madness of sending a petition to a ruler so distant that only your remote descendents would hear a reply.

And it was too easy for anyone who wished to escape the jurisdiction of any prospective government; they need only shut down their radio and alter their orbit by a few degrees. Space is vast, and human habitats were small and silent.

(Planets? No one lived on the surface of those vulnerable rocks, suited against atmospheres humans could not endure, at gravities that they could not, by adjusting spin, control. Legends said that Earth was a world where unsuited men could walk abroad. The chances of finding a perfect twin—and the match must be perfect, for humans were evolved for only one environment—made certain that the legend would remain a legend. In the meantime, mankind lived on ships and habitats.)

After the destruction of his home, Smith himself had been sold into slavery.

Slavery? Why *not* slavery? It was not economically feasible in a technological society, true. But then again, slavery had *never* been economically feasible, even back on Old Earth. The impracticality of slavery had not abolished it. History's only period without slavery, back on Earth, happened when the civilized Western nations, led by Britain, brought the pressure of world opinion (or open war) against the nations that practiced it. The Abolitionist Movements and their ideals reached to all continents.

But, on Earth, it did not take years and generations for nearest neighbors to take note of what their neighbors did.

Endless space meant endless lawlessness.

There was, however, custom.

Radio traffic was easier to send than ships from star to star, and there was no danger in listening to it. Radio-men and scholars in every system had to keep ancient languages alive, or else the lore of the talking universe would be closed to them. Common language permitted the possibility of common custom.

Furthermore, systems that did not maintain the ancient protocols for approaching starships could not tempt captains to spend the time and fuel to decelerate. If colonists wanted news and gifts and emigrants and air, they had to announce their readiness to obey the guest law.

And, of course, there were rumors and horrid myths of supernatural retributions visited on those who broke the guest law. Smith thought

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that the mere existence of such rumors proved that the guest law was not, and could never be, enforced.

Smith was not awake when the heralds exchanged radio-calls and conducted negotiations between the ships.

But when the seneschal ordered him alert again, he saw the looks of guilt and fear on the faces of the highlife officers, the too-nervous laughter, too-quickly smothered.

The seneschal's cabin was sparsely decorated, merely a sphere divided by guy-ropes, without bead-webs or battle-flags or religious plant-balls growing on their tiny globules of earth. However, every other panel of the sphere was covered with a fragile screen of hemp-paper inked with iconography or calligraphy. (It was a credit to the seneschal's high-born agility that none of the hemp-paper screens were torn. When he practiced the grapples, thrusts, and slash-rebounds of zero-gravity fencing, he apparently judged his trajectories so well that he never spun or kicked into one. "Always kept his feet on the floor," as the old saying went.)

The seneschal was giving Smith instructions for a work detail. A party was to go EVA (still called "hanging" even though the ship lacked spin) to prepare a section of hull to receive sections from the stranger's ship, once it had been cannibalized.

(Smith was secretly agonized to hear the seneschal call the beautiful strange craft "it" instead of "she," as if the ship were a piece of machinery, already dead, and no longer a living vessel.)

They were interrupted by the attention claxon in the ceremonial imperative mode. The seneschal reached out with both feet, and gracefully drew open a panel hidden behind the hemp-paper screens, to reveal a private viewing well beneath.

Shining in the image was a scene from the huge forward cargo lock. The main clamshell radiation-shockwave shields had been folded back, and the wide circle of the inner lock's docking ring glittered black in the light of many floating lanterns.

Beyond was a glimpse of the stranger ship. Here was an archaic lock, both doors open in a sign of trust. Controls of ancient fashion glinted silvery in an otherwise black axis, which opened like a dark well filled with gloom and frost, ripped guy-lines trembling like cobwebs in the gusts from irregular ventilators.

A figure came out from the gloom. He passed the lock, and slowed himself with a squirt from an antique leg-jet, raising his foot to his center of mass and spraying a cloud before him. He hovered in the center of the black ring, while the squirt of mist that hid him slowly dissipated.

The seneschal said in a voice of curiosity and fear: "It's true, then. He has no entourage! What happened to his crew?" He had apparently forgotten who was in his cabin, for he spoke in the conversational register.

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"Request permission to come aboard," the stranger was calling in Anglatin.

Smith stared in wonder. The stranger was very short, even for a heavyweight. The skin of his head and hands was normal, albeit blank and untattooed, but the rest of his body was loose, wrinkled, and folded, as if his skin were contaminated with some horrible epidermal disease. Apparently he was a eunuch; there were no sex organs visible between his legs. His hair was white, and had been programmed to grow, for some reason, only on the top, back, and sides of his skull (Smith had seen religious orders modify their hair to this design, claiming such ugliness was ancient tradition).

Suddenly Smith realized that the blue material of the stranger's skin was *not* skin, but fabric, as if he were suited (with gauntlets and helm removed) from some suit too thin to protect a man from vacuum; or as if he wore a lowlifer's work-smock without pockets or adhesive pads.

"Garb," said the seneschal, obviously wondering along the same lines Smith had been. "The old word for outer skins is garb. It is used to retain heat close to the body, without the energy cost of heating the whole cabin. He must have lost environmental control long ago. That weapon at his hip is also an antique. It is called a kiri-su-gama. Very difficult to control. One must spin the ball-and-chain counter-opposite from the hook or else one rotates wildly during combat. Either the hook or the ball can be used to snare the opponent to prevent blow-rebounds. But what arrogance to carry such an antique! Back in the times when ships had large interior spaces, perhaps, perhaps! But now? Knives and cestuses are better for fighting in cabins and crawltubes. Arrogance! Arrogance! And, ugh! He wears foot-mittens instead of foot-gloves; nor do I blame him. See how his toes are deformed! Has he been walking on them? Ghastly!"

But the stranger was obviously the foreign captain. The emblems on his epaulettes were the same as those that the *Procrustes'* captain had growing from modified areas of her shoulder cells. His blue "garb" was the same color, nearly, as her pigments.

She was speaking now, granting his permission to come aboard with the words and gestures of the ancient boarding-ceremony. She concluded with: "And by what title is it proper to call our honored guest?" And her flute-dwarf gave a three-tone flourish with his pipes so that the ritual music ended as her words did.

"Call me Descender. My ship is the noble *Olympian Vendetta.* And by what title is it proper to call my generous hostess?"

"Call me Ereshkigal, captain of the noble ship *Procrustes.*"

"Noble fellow-Captain, because mankind is so widely flown, and many years and light-years separate brother from brother, tell me, before I board your craft, whether my understanding of the guest law is sufficient, and whether it accords with yours at every point? Excuse this ques-

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tion if it seems impertinent or suspicious; nothing of the sort is meant or should be inferred; I merely wish to ensure I give no unwitting offense or that I make no unfounded assumptions. For, as the poet says, 'The wise man calculates each maneuver as he goes; ignorance and inattention feed the seeds from which all danger grows.'"

"Noble fellow-Captain, you speak well and gentlemanly," said the captain, visibly impressed with the other's humble eloquence. "No offense is taken, nor do I permit offense to be taken by my men. As the poet says, 'A gentleman learns five things to do aright: to fly, to fence, to tell the truth, to know no fear, to be polite.' And politely you have spoken, sir."

But her quote was not quite as apt as, nor did it display the learning of, the stranger's.

She called for her chancellor, who, without any show of impatience, recited the whole body of the guest law, phrase by phrase, and answered with grave care when the stranger politely asked for definitions of ambiguous wording.

There were customary rules mentioned that Smith had never heard before, or had not heard in detail, but everything seemed to be based on common sense and common politeness: Aid to be given to fellow ships met in the void, not to exceed one-tenth of total value of ships and crew; more to be exchanged if mutually agreeable; navigational data to be shared without reservation; standardized protocols for swapping air and supplies to ships in need; all maneuvering before and after docking to be determined by formula based on mass and vector, the lighter ships going farther to match velocities with the heavier, so that the total fuel expenditures were roughly equal; guests to bring their own air, plus a tithe for the host plants; common forms of politeness to be used; disembarking to be done at will after due warning; no departure from the guest-ship to be interpreted as constituting any abandonment; the code of duels to be suspended; any disagreements as to valuations of goods exchanged or veracity of informations shared to be determined by such arbitrators as shall be mutually agreed-upon. And so on.

Smith, through the viewing well, could see the gathered nobles growing uneasy, not meeting each other's eyes. Looks of sullen guilt darkened on their tattooed faces as they heard each phrase and lofty sentiment of the laws they intended to violate.

When the recitation of the law was done, Captain Descender and Captain Ereshkigal bound themselves by formidable oaths to abide by every aspect of this law. They exchanged grave and serious assurances of their honesty and good intent.

Smith, listening, felt cold.

The oathtaking concluded with Captain Ereshkigal saying: ". . . and if I am forsworn, let devils and ghosts consume me in Gaia's Wasteland, in God's Hell, and may I suffer the vengeance of the Machines of Earth."

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"Exactly so," said Captain Descender, smiling.

The feast-hall of the *Procrustes* was aft of the bridge, but forward of the drive core, along the axis, where it was protected by (and inward of) all lower decks. The Officers' Mess (to use the old poet's term for it) was the highest of the high country, a place of ceremony and rare delight.

Banners of translucent fabric, colored, or luminous with fantastic heraldries, ran from point to point throughout the cylinder. The fabric was meant to absorb escaping food crumbs or particles of flying wine from the air, but it also muted and colored the lights shining from the bulkheads.

For drinks (or drinkers) of low esteem, there were wineskins. But the ship's cook had outdone himself for the high wines: pleasing to the eye, the globules of high wine or wine-jelly gleamed and glittered, held only in skins of fishnet web. The interstices of the web were small enough to keep the wine englobed by its own surface tension. Nobles had to drink from such webs with a delicate and graceful touch, lest a sudden maneuver allow wine to splatter through the webbing.

Here was the captain, floating at the focal point of an array of banners so that she looked like a Boddhisattva of Gaia in the center of a celestial rose. She was in the Reserved Regard position; that is, right foot folded on her lap, left foot extended, foot-spoon held lightly between her toes, left hand holding an open fan, right hand overhead in graceful gesture, wearing an eating glove with different spices crusting the fingernails. As tradition required, she held a napkin in her right foot folded in a complex origami pattern. It was considered a crime against elegance to have to actually use the napkin.

Her hair was arrayed in the coiffure called Welcome Dish, braided at the ends and electrostatically charged so that it made an evenly swirled disk above and behind her head and shoulders, like a halo.

Her feast was arranged in a circle around her, little colorful moons of ripe fruit, balls of wine-jelly, spheres of lacy bread, meatballs or sausages tumbling end-over-end. As the feast progressed, she would rotate slowly clockwise, to let one delicacy after another come within reach of hand and foot (toe-foods for the foot, finger-foods for the hand) and the order of the orbiting food around her was organized by traditional culinary theory.

Since the captain's head was always "up," the feasters must be attentive, and match their rotations to the captain, eating neither too swiftly nor too slowly, nor grabbing for any favored food out of order.

Descender was the last to be escorted in. The feasting nobles formed a rough cylinder, with Captain Ereshkigal at one end and Descender's place at the other.

Smith was hovering behind Captain Ereshkigal, not to eat, of course, but to answer any technical questions the captain might demand. He had a towel wrapped around his right foot and left hand, to capture any

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grease that might float from the Captain's lips. He also held her charging-brush, to act as hair-page, in case any haphazard event should interfere with the flow of her locks.

Smith noticed with some surprise that there was no page near Descender's mess-station; nor were there any guy-ropes very near reach.

When Descender entered, he flew using a rotate-and-thrust technique, shifting the attitude of his body with spins of the weighted tail of his sash, then moving with wasteful spurts of jet. It was an awkward and very old-fashioned method of maneuvering, not at all like the graceful, silent glides of nobles using fans, their moves full of subtle curves and changes, deceptive to an enemy in combat. It was easy to guess the trajectories of a man using rotate-and-thrust; easy for a fighter with a knife to kill him. Smith felt the same embarrassment for the man as someone in gravity might feel seeing a grown man crawl.

When Descender took his position, he paused, blinking, evidently puzzled by the lack of a convenient anchor nearby, the lack of service.

Smith noticed that the lights facing in that direction were focused without banners to block direct glare. Another oversight.

All the nobles watched Descender with careful sidelong looks. Some vague pleasantries were exchanged; grace was said; the meal began.

One knight loudly called: "Look here, mate, at what a fine dish we have: we'll suck this marrow dry!" And he tossed a leg of mutton lightly across the axis to the chancellor at the captain's right.

There was a slight silence. It was considered boorish to allow any food to pass between another feaster and the captain; the leg of lamb was centered just where it would block Descender's view.

The chancellor reached out with a leg-fork and hooked the meat, kicking trembling bits of grease in Descender's direction. "Aye. At least a sheep has good sense enough to know when it is due for the slaughter-pump house!"

No one laughed.

Descender turned his head. The doors behind him had been shut, and now two shipcarls were there, arms folded, legs in a position called Deadly Lotus, where fingers and toes could touch the hilts of sheathed blades. Unlike where Descender was, the shipcarls were surrounded by a web of guy-wires, and had surfaces near to kick off from.

It was with a sinking feeling that Smith saw Descender look up and down at the food-ring they had prepared for him. All the meats and fruits in the arc nearest his head were toe-foods; finger-foods were along the lower half of the circle; he must either grab for food out of turn, or eat uncouthly.

He looked as if he wanted to say something. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Perhaps a hint of nagging fear began to show on Descender's features.

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The captain herself looked a little sad. She took up the salt-ball, but instead of pushing it along the axis to the other captain (showing that he was next in priority), she took a nailfull of salt and brushed the ball toward the seneschal on her right upper.

He grinned at Descender, took a fingernail's worth of salt, but then tossed it to his left. All the knights were served before the salt-ball came to Descender. The last knight to touch it looked carefully at Descender, licked the salt-ball with his tongue, and threw it toward Descender with a jerk of his jaw.

Descender's face, by now, was an impassive mask, but his jaw was clenched. A bead of sweat floated from his forehead. He did not reach for the insulting salt-ball, but let it fly past his shoulder toward the bulkhead behind.

All the nobles had their hands near their weapons. The chamber was utterly silent.

There was something sad in Descender's eye when he smiled a weak smile and reached up for a foot-peach near his head. "I compliment my noble fellow-captain for her bountiful feast," he said, and took a bite.

There was some snickering. It was like seeing a man under acceleration eating off what, in the old times, they would have called the floor.

One of the shipcarls behind Descender opened the ventilator, so that the breezes began to slowly scatter his food. Descender paused; he grabbed one or two pieces of fruit and stuck them under his elbow to hang onto them.

It looked absurd. But nobody laughed.

It was hard to say whether or not Descender actually was frightened. His face showed no emotion. But he certainly acted like a frightened man.

He said, "I thank you for your hospitality. I wish now to return to my ship."

The chancellor said, "But we are not done with you. That ship of yours; it is a nice one, isn't it? We would be happy to accept its drives and main hulls sections as gifts. Or perhaps we can simply claim it as salvage. There's no one aboard it right now."

Descender curled his legs, and put his hands near his kiri-su-gama. He spoke softly: "She. It's more polite, good sir, to address those crafts who sustain our lives as 'her' and 'she.'"

The winged knight said loudly, "Those who carry arms are required, when honor commands, to use them. Those false lowlife debris and pokeboys who scrounge the weapons off their betters deserve a looter's airlock. But who says a thief has any care for honor? It is to honor, gentlemen, that I propose a toast! To the honor and to the air that sustains us! Let those who will not drink be deprived of both. But look! You have no page, you who call yourself a captain! Hoy! Smith! Grease-monkey! Hand

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our guest his last draught of wine; your hands are the only ones fit to hand it to him!" And he took from his pouch a plastic bag from the medical stores, filled with liquid waste. The knight threw it to Smith, who caught it with trembling fingers.

This was a mortal insult. If Smith passed the bag to him, Descender could neither drink, nor could he refuse the toast, with honor. The carefully planned program of insults that had gone before, Smith guessed, had only been to see how much Descender would stomach. If he had any hidden weapons, tricks, or traps, now he would show them; Captain Ereshkigal would only lose one lesser knight; Ereshkigal could repudiate the rash young knight once he was killed, apologize, blame him; polite words and polite pretense could keep a bit of honor intact during such retreat.

That is, if he had some hidden weapon. If not . . .

Anger made Smith forget all caution. He threw down the heavy charging-brush and the sloshing bag of medical waste, so that he drifted away from the captain and out of her immediate knifereach. "Here's a poor man, innocent as innocence, and you're going to strangle him up and eat his fine ship! He's done no wrong, and answered all your slurs with kind words! Why can't you let him be?! Why can't you let him *be?!*"

The captain spoke without turning her head: "Engineer, you are insubordinate. Your air ration is hereby decreased to zero. If you report to the medical house for euthanasia, your going will be pleasant, and note will be made of your obedience in the ship's log. If you continue your insubordination, however, your name will be blotted out. I have no wish to dishonor you; go quietly."

Descender spoke in a strange and distant tone of voice: "Captain, your order is not lawful. At feast times, the code of subordination is relaxed, and free speech allowed, at least among those civilized peoples who recognize the guest law . . ." He turned and looked at Smith, addressing him directly, "Engineer, what, pray tell, is your name? Tell it to me, and I shall preserve it in my ship's log, my book of life, and it may endure longer than any record of this age."

But Smith's courage deserted him then, and he did not answer. He flapped the napkin he held as a fan, moving back to the bulkhead, where he crouched, looking each way with wide, wild eyes, ready to spring off in any direction.

Yet no one paid much heed to him. The nobles were still concentrating on Descender. There was silence in the chamber.

The gentlemen were each stealing quick glances at their neighbors. Each crouched and ready. But no one was prepared to take the final swoop to make their threats and hints come true. Perhaps there was something hard about killing a man who had not drawn his weapon; perhaps they were each thinking that now, even now, it still was not too late to back away. . . .

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Then the young piebald knight with the racing-wings spoke up, kicking the sheaths off his blades, displaying steel. Now it was too late. His voice rang out, high-pitched and over-loud: "What is more hateful in the sight of God than cowardice? By Gaia, how I hate the thing (I will not call him a man) who takes a blow without a show of spleen! He smiles with his beggar's smile, his shoulders hunched, his eye wet, a tremble in his whining voice. Hatred, gentleman, hatred and disgust is what we ought to feel for those we hurt! Weakness is loathsome! And any man who will not fight deserves to die! A lowlife heart should not dare to hide inside what seems a captain's chest. I say we cut the false heart *out!*"

Descender's face was stiff and expressionless. His voice was tense and even. His eyes were filled with dreadful calm: "You are angry because you have no good *excuse* for anger, have you? It would be easier to do the deed if I had given some offense, wouldn't it? Or if I somehow seemed less human? Noble fellow-Captain Ereshkigal! There is no need for this. What I can spare from my ship, I will freely give. Let us avoid a scene of horror. You conduct yourself as one who honors honorable conduct. Let not this feast end in tragic death!"

The young knight shouted, "Beg and beg! Must we hear the beggar mewl!? Cut his throat and silence this shrill noise!" He kicked his legs to clash his blades together, a bright crash of metallic noise.

But Captain Ereshkigal held open her fan for silence. "My brother captain asks, with dignity, that we not pretend that this is other than it is. We will not mask our deed under the code of duels. Let it openly be named: Murder, then, murder and piracy!"

There was a slight noise all around the chamber, sighs and hisses from the gentlemen. Some looked angry, or saddened, or surprised; most were stony-faced; but each face, somehow, still was dark with cruelty.

The captain continued: "But you have brought it on *yourself,* brother captain! How *dare* you have a fine hull, fine drives, and air, when we are many, and you are only one?"

"The property is mine, by right."

"And when you die, it shall be ours, by right *or* wrong."

"You have no need."

"But we *want.*"

"Captain, I beg you—"

"We wish to hear no more of begging!"

"So. . . ? Is this the rule by which you wish also to be judged? Then no plea for mercy will be heard when your own time comes."

"Judged? How dare you speak defiance to us?"

"You condemn me when I apologize, and then equally when I do not. What if I say, take my ship, but spare my life?"

"We will not even spare an ounce of air!"

"Hah! I will be more generous than you, Ereshkigal. I will spare one

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life; perhaps that of the scared little Smith there. He has done me no harm, and I think that he begins to suspect what I am. Yes; one person should survive to spread the tale, otherwise the exercise is useless."

"Do you think to frighten us with superstitious hints and lies? Englobe him, my gentlemen! Steward, close the ducts! We must have our drapes sop up the blood-cloud so no drops foul our air system."

Descender spoke softly while the bejeweled, beribboned, and tattooed knights and vavasors, glittering, smiling, fans waving, drew their snaring-hooks and dirks and slowly circled him.

He spoke in a voice of Jovian calm: "Who else but a machine intelligence has so long a life that it can intend to bring law and order to the Void, and yet expect to see the slow results? Civilization, gentlemen, is when all men surrender their natural habits of violence, because they fear the retribution of some power sufficient to terrify and awe them into obedience. To civilize a wilderness is long effort; and when the wilderness is astronomically vast, the terror must be vast as well."

Captain Ereshkigal, her eyes wide with growing panic, made a clumsy gesture with her fan, shrieking, "Kill him! Kill!"

Steel glittered in their hands as the shouting knights and nobles kicked off the walls and dove. With hardly any surprise at all, Smith saw the stranger beginning to shine with supernatural light, and saw him reach up with flaming fingers to pull aside what turned out to be, after all, a mask. ●

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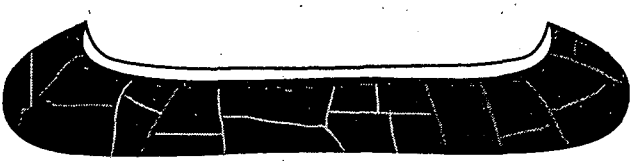
Tony Daniel

Tony Daniel's last *Asimov's* story, "A Robot's Twilight Companion" (August 1996), will be the first part of his next novel. The book—tentatively titled *Earthling*—is due out from Tor this fall. Another of Mr. Daniel's recent tales, "Life on the Moon" (April 1995), was the winner of our Tenth Annual Readers' Award for Best Short Story and a finalist for the 1996 Hugo Award. In his new story, the author navigates the deep waters of the psyche with a pair of enigmatic . . .

BLACK CANOES



Only once did I ever think of Carol Verdane as a wren. Most people *always* did—a wren with big, big eyes. Carol had weak sight and wore glasses thick as stained glass panes. Her stare could be startling when you were unprepared. But there was nothing of predatory owlishness about her, so a wren she was to some. She spoke with precise locution and a clipped Midwestern accent. She was brown-haired, bird-boned, and industrious. There was little about pre-historic Plains Indian culture she didn't know, and she'd spent a couple of years working as an ethnographer on a Sioux reservation to understand contemporary Indians better.

"It was a year before most of the Indians I knew stopped lying to me,"

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she once told me. "Eye contact makes Indians think you're upset, and they'll lie to you to make you more comfortable. They thought I was always upset."

"You," she said, cocking her head to catch me in her gaze, "would have gotten along fine, Edward."

To me, Carol was not a sweet little wren at all. She had a power over me that I still do not completely understand. It was decidedly un-wren-like. Whenever we met, my unconscious mind took charge of my body. This is difficult to explain. Perhaps the best way is to describe Carol as a kind of *key*. She slipped into whatever lock kept my conscious mind battened down over what was underneath. She turned, and opened me up without the slightest difficulty. But she never turned willfully, I don't think.

I met her at a pottery workshop up at Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. I'd come to learn the traditional techniques of the Makah Indians; Carol was there because she had a Makah friend—a famous ceramicist—who was teaching the course. He introduced her to me, with a wink, as Little Wren. From the first, I felt her effect on me. We didn't talk much at the workshop, but we went for walks together in the evenings, and Carol, who knew the stars, taught me constellations.

She slept with me several years later, when she was doing graduate work in Missoula, Montana. She'd been very lonely and didn't get along well with the few colleagues she had there. I think she was far out of their intellectual league, but she didn't want to say this was so. I visited her over a weekend, propositioned her on the Saturday night, and we made love, once. I drove back to Seattle across the Rocky Mountain outriders, the twisted basalts of the Columbia Plateau, rattled and only half-awake. The stars were bright, and I still remembered some of their names.

After that, every time I met Carol, the effect was even stronger. I am an artist—a potter—and I make my living off the upsurgings of my unconscious. The hinterlands of the mind are not utterly strange places to me. I cannot keep from having powerful urges—good and bad—but I liked to think I have a certain social control over their expression. Whenever I saw Carol, that control vanished.

But it wasn't only desire that overcame me. Also, there were . . . other things, feelings from deep, deep in my nature. Deep in human nature. She eventually wound up in St. Louis, where she was exhibit director at the Museum of Natural History. I visited her there a few times. Once, we met on a Saturday at Blueberry Hill, a pub near Washington University, which I'd frequented when I was in graduate school. It was also near Forest Park, where Carol's museum was. I got there first and was drinking a beer when Carol came in.

I hadn't seen her in three years, and she was changed a bit. Her hair

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was shorter and she wore jewelry and a touch of makeup, smartly professional. I was in my usual mud-spattered tatters, and we were quite the mismatched pair. Yet it took only a moment, a beer, for her key to click into place. Before I knew it came out of my mouth, I was propositioning her. She politely turned me down, as she had all times but once. But getting over that wave of desire, another hit me, this one—it is hard to describe it even now—somehow *deeper* than the sexual.

Sitting there in cultured St. Louis, I suddenly pictured Carol and me fiercely *running* together. Running over a plain, a savannah, perhaps. Or through open woodland. It was a *feeling*, not an image, you see. The feeling was *in* me, in my blood and bones. My calves clenched and my toes curled with the intensity. It was a muscular joy, as if we were very hungry, and we were going to kill something, and eat it, and we were running it down.

We finished our beers and Carol had to go back to work. I drove on, south down the Mississippi, traveling to some ceramics conference in Memphis, I think.

And as I drove into the twilight along the winding drainage of the eastern North American continent, somewhere south of Cape Girardeau I glanced through trees to the muddy river, and there in a little riverine estuary I saw a massive shape, humped and shaggy. I slammed on the brakes of my jeep, pulled over.

A woolly mammoth was standing up to its haunches in the water. It was drinking. It lifted its head, taller than the trees. Brown water dripped from its tusks.

"What," I whispered. "What are you?"

I stared. It lowered its head—it must have been a he, with those tusks—he lowered his head and churned up the silt of the river bottom. He raised his head again with a mass of vegetation hanging from his small mouth. I watched him chew it.

When I opened the door of my jeep, he *heard* it click. I stumbled out—onto the road, I could have been killed by a passing car, so oblivious I was—toward the mammoth. He looked around, couldn't locate me with his weak eyes. But the sound was enough to spook him, and off he crashed into the bushes. I ran over, almost fell into the river climbing down the embankment to the little cove where he'd been. There was nothing. But the water was swirling with mud and the nearby shrubs were chuffed up. I looked everywhere for a track, but found none.

So I drove away. There was nothing else to do. There are things in our lives, or I should say, there are things in *my* life that happen, and are without explanation. I do not work ceaselessly seeking to explain them, and I do not think myself a deluded fool. I remember them, and cherish them if they are good, and stop questioning them when questioning finds no answer, but becomes merely a worrying at its own wounds.

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Seeing the mammoth was such a thing. And it was directly related to seeing Carol Verdane earlier that day, of that I felt sure.

Two years later, I had moved back to the South, to Alabama, where I was raised. I was spending the summer on a man-made lake at the foot of the great mountain plateau called Lookout which stretches a hundred miles from Chattanooga, Tennessee, across northwestern Georgia, and into rural northeastern Alabama. I lived in the cabin of a friend who was traveling overseas. The cabin had everything I needed: a place to sleep and cook—and a pottery studio, kiln, and a wheel.

The Little River is the only water in North America to flow entirely on the *top* of a mountain, and geologists are still puzzling out how that came to be. It has cut a deep gorge into the back of Lookout Mountain, with cliffs sometimes eight hundred feet high. The canyon floor is choked with vegetation, and no one lives down there. In those cliffs, there are caves—many of which have yet to be explored. The caves of Lookout Mountain are also famous for their pottery clays, and this was what had drawn my friend to these parts. I felt strange coming home after decades away. I'd left the South in my early twenties, seeking a wider, less provincial world, but the clays had called me back, as well. It was not long before I heard fishermen tell of a cave nearby, over on the wild side of the lake, where the Little River finally emptied itself down Lookout Mountain and into Weiss Lake.

Those who ventured it seldom went further than a couple of hundred feet inside. There was water at the cave back, for one thing, and a great colony of bats who did not like to be disturbed during the day. What was more interesting to me than the stories was the fact, mentioned in passing, that going into the cave required good boots, because the mud of that cave clung to the feet in big clumps and was almost impossible to get off.

To a potter, this sounded like heavenly stuff to work with.

I planned an expedition to the cave, but it was several weeks before I got the chance. First of all, getting there required a boat, and that was one thing my friend's place wasn't equipped with. Then I was away for a week teaching a course at an arts and crafts enclave in the Carolinas. While I was there, another potter friend of mine who lived nearby loaned me one of his two canoes for the summer. When finally I returned, it was midsummer—an awful, drippy time of the year in Alabama for those who were not brought up in the heat. For me, it felt very much like I was a kid again, just let out of school, and I was ready for an adventure.

I left the canoe strapped to the top of my jeep, brought my other gear in, then listened to my accumulated phone messages. To my surprise, there was one from Carol Verdane. She hardly ever called me—she was always quite busy in St. Louis, and usually spent what free time she had with her family in Madison, Wisconsin. But she was going to be attending a curators' conference in Atlanta, had decided to drive down, and

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wanted to know if she could swing by on her way back to St. Louis. I checked the date on the machine and found that her conference was actually being held at that very moment.

It took five or six calls to finally locate her, but I found that she was still up for a visit, and had been disappointed that I wasn't around. I invited her over, gave her directions, and the next day, there in my borrowed cabin was Carol Verdane, changing out of her city duds into jeans and a T-shirt.

Even then, I felt the key turning, the upsurge of—whatever it was she aroused, produced, called forth, in me. The primitive? That wasn't quite it, but close. But I was not a complete boor, and I controlled myself well enough. Christ, she's come out here for a bit of relaxation, I thought. Not to get her bones jumped before she's got a breath of the air.

We went down to my dock, drank—whisky for me, gin for Carol—and talked until the sun set and the moon rose full over the bow of Dirtseller Mountain away east. There was a blanket of insects a quarter mile high in that Southern summer atmosphere. Near the lake surface, bass breached, snatched, and descended back to their fishy dank. Just above them, swallows flitted in quick curves and dives—always keeping to the same level, the same height above the water—back and forth to feed the gapes of their chicks in nests on the shore banks. High in the sky, in the gloaming, Carol saw bats and pointed them out to me. They flew in great, three-dimensional arcs, in controlled, leathery tumble, as if a man were falling about weightless in the dark blue sky, clothed in a flapping raincoat.

"There," Carol said, pointing. "There's another. So quiet. I'll bet the air is full of their crying, if we could only hear it."

I nodded, sipped my cold water whisky, and told Carol about the cave. We carried the canoe to the lake at dawn the next morning, and were on our way to the mouth of the Little River as the sun rose, following almost exactly the path of the last night's moon, over the green hump of Dirtseller Mountain.

We paddled in silence through the bright morning. We passed Canadian geese—some of them remained year round on Weiss—and a brace of great blue herons, hunting snakes and frogs along the banks of an island. Carol gasped at the beauty of the birds, and I told her to watch them for a while, and I would paddle. We silently slid past them, and into the rivercourse.

I followed the fishermen's directions as best I remembered, and soon found a birch tree with long hatches, which was the cave's marker. We landed the canoe and, bringing headlamps and daypacks, we walked up the hill. The cave was not far, perhaps two hundred feet. It opened up grandly; there was at least a twenty-foot clearance over our heads, and forty feet on either side of us. The way down was steep, but not unman-

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ageable, and we slipped and slid our way into the main cavern. I stooped and fingered the ground. Wonderful potter's clay, just waiting to be ashed and thrown on my wheel.

Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and a few stalagmites huddled in clumps on the floor. Our lights revealed that they'd been blackened by the oily touch of many human hands. There was a strange, white noise that filled the air.

"Is that water, falling down a hole?" I said.

Carol listened for a moment. "No," she said. "Bats."

And it was. The further back in the cave we went, the louder the sound grew, until there was no mistaking it, or the smell of the bat guano. When they roosted, bats were audible. And as we got nearer, they became *agitated.* Shining my light down the cave's passageway, I could see them dart in and out of the beam, looking like big, big moths.

Carol walked on ahead. She shone her light upward. The ceiling was filled with cracks and crevices, all jammed with what looked like a brown goo—but it was bats, clumped together, to keep each other and their babies warm.

"I don't think they'll bother us," she said.

"But they sure don't like us," I added. "Maybe we should respect that."

"They'll get used to us," she said. "I want to check for—signs of habitation." She continued back. I suppressed a shudder, and followed after.

I felt something touch my shoulder—a bat I thought. I reached to swat it, convinced against all reason that it was sucking my blood. My palm came away dark.

"Oh," I said, "shit."

From ahead came a splashing noise. Carol had found water and stepped down into it.

"Let's follow this a ways," she said. "This really interests me."

"Carol, isn't this dangerous," I said. "I mean, we have no idea—"

"—oh, I think it will be all right," she called back to me. "Follow me."

We sloshed forward through utterly still water. My boots sank into the silt on the bottom and, training my light downward, I could not see the tops of my feet. We walked quite a ways back, I reluctantly, Carol plodding determinedly ahead. Finally, she stopped.

"Aha," she said.

"What?" I came up beside her, looked to where her headlamp was shining.

There, on a small, dry ledge, were two perched canoes. We went over to them. Each was wooden and of a piece, made from a single log. They were as black as pitch, as if they'd been smoked and hardened in a fire.

"These can't be . . . do you think they're old, Carol?"

She ran her hand along the curved stern of one of the canoes. "I don't know," she said. "Let's see if they float."

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"But doesn't that violate some, you know, archaeological tenet or something?"

"Yes, but I'm quite wet," she said. "And I want to go deeper."

"We could go back and get *our* canoe," I said, weakly.

Carol was already tugging one of the canoes from the ledge. It slid into the water with a splash.

"What about—"

She reached inside the canoe and extracted a wooden pole, about four feet long.

"—paddles," I said.

Both canoes were only big enough for one person, so I pulled down the other. It too had a push pole inside it. Carol pulled herself out of the water and onto the ledge. From there, she easily stepped into one of the canoes. She sat down and laid her daypack in front of her. I followed her example, and, with a bit of teetering, got into the other. We continued back into the cave.

After a while, the sound of the bats receded behind us, for which I was heartily glad. A while longer, though, and the ceiling began to slope downward. Soon I was ducking to avoid masses of rock that hung down just waiting to bang a head. A couple of times, the rock succeeded. Finally we came to a narrow place where the sides *and* ceiling came together. It was just big enough to fit a canoe, if the paddler got on his back and pushed himself along with his hands against the ceiling.

"Uh, Carol, don't you think this is far enough?" I said. She looked very much like she was preparing to go through the opening. "I mean, we could get *stuck*."

Instead of answering me, Carol reached up and clicked her light off. Mine was still on, so I could see her there, floating in front of me in the black canoe.

"It isn't *quite* far enough yet," she said. "Really, Edward, I know you are getting a bit spooked, but if you'll just come along with me a bit further . . . there's some clever pottery. I believe you'll find it very interesting."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "And how do you know?"

"Well, stay if you must," she said. And she poled one more time, maneuvering her canoe into the opening, then leaned back and pulled herself in. I watched as the canoe slid forward, its sides clunking against the rock. I watched as the stern disappeared, black glint into utter blackness. After a moment, staying seemed more frightening than following. I pushed forward and entered the hole.

I pawed myself along for some time. Finally, the closeness began to get to me, and I had to stop and get my breathing under control. "Carol!" I called. "Anything yet?"

Her voice came back, muffled, but comprehensible. "Just a little further."

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I gathered what wits I had and continued on. And she was right. In a moment I began to smell better air. Good air, even. And then, with a final push, I was out of the tunnel. I was out of the cave. I was in a still woodland pool, drifting in sunlight, sweet sunlight.

"There now," Carol said. I looked around, but all was so bright, so impossibly bright, I couldn't locate her. "Didn't I tell you it would be all right?"

"Where the hell are we?" I asked, and then for good measure: "Where the *hell* are we?"

"This is—" she started to say. "I've been here before," she continued.

Finally, my eyes adjusted. We were in a little pond, surrounded by trees. Something buzzed by my head, checked me out, and then buzzed on, iridescent. A dragonfly. At the end of the pond, a creek flowed out and disappeared in closely crowded trees. Deciduous trees—oak, hickory, maple. I recognized them. I'd learned them as a boy.

"This isn't the Paleozoic," I said, somehow relieved to have *that* cleared up. No dinosaurs; it was a good thing that there would be no dinosaurs.

"Heavens, no," said Carol. "More like the Paleo*lithic*."

"Oh."

"But not really."

"No?"

"I've been coming here every year," she said. "Since I was a girl. I've wanted to share it with someone for a long time."

"Sort of your . . . summer place?"

"Yes, exactly," she said, smiling. "Come on, though. They're waiting."

"Who is *they?*"

"Some people I want you to meet."

It was then that I noticed that she'd taken off her glasses. This was pretty amazing, because Carol could not see a half inch in front of her face without them—back in . . . reality. I realized that this was the first time I'd seen her unmagnified eyes since that evening in Montana so long ago.

She poled her canoe toward the end of the pool, and went out and down the stream. It was narrow, but not too narrow for the canoes. And it flowed fast enough for us to stop pushing and let it carry us along through the woods.

"Isn't this fun?" Carol said. "Things are very easy here, sometimes."

Soon the little stream widened out, and then it emptied into a bigger creek, this one with shoals that we had to negotiate. Then the creek flowed into flat bottomlands, and left the rocks behind. We poled along for an hour at least. The sun grew high and I took sunblock from my pack and smeared it on my face and arms.

"Want some?" I asked Carol. For some reason, this greatly amused her. She shook her head, and continued on. After another long stretch of

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time—I had no watch and I was losing all track of it—I saw smoke up ahead. We came to two small hills, one on either side of the creek.

And below the hills, dwellings. Houses made from pole, grass thatch and bark. And people. Indians. Carol pushed her canoe over to the bank, and I followed along beside her. We beached the canoes, and there we stood. The people gathered round us—women, men, children who ran up and touched Carol's hands, stroked her hips and thighs, then ran away giggling.

"Closhi wa nathay," she said, or something that sounded like that. "Mel na brodu Edward." She pointed to me. Some of the people looked at me and smiled. A man walked up to me with quick strides and slapped me on the shoulder. I stood there looking bewildered, and he broke into a great guffaw.

"Hega thinks you are very greasy," Carol said. "A tall man, but very greasy."

I *was* tall, compared to these people, although I stand only five nine or so. Carol spoke with them further, and then we all went to the dwellings, to a fire ring that was in the middle of them. Something that smelled delicious was roasting there on a stone. I looked closer, and saw that it was a tortilla. There was a pile of them on another stone near to the fire, keeping warm. We all sat down on our haunches and the tortillas were passed around.

"What do you think?" Carol said. "Good?"

"Wonderful," I replied between bites. "But this isn't quite corn, is it? It's too . . . wild tasting."

"Teosinte," she said. "The grandmother of maize."

"Eh? Eh?" Hega said, looking at me.

"How do you say 'tastes good?' " I asked Carol.

"Nathay meda."

"Nathay meda," I told Hega. "Nathay very meda."

We slept outside, by the dying fire, under the stars. They were right. They were the earth's stars. That night was the second time Carol and I made love. We did it in plain sight of the people, but they discreetly turned their heads. They were used to granting privacy in this way, I gathered. Carol was a wonder of trembling warmth in my arms. I held her tight and felt her heart beating so fast I was afraid it might burst, but she pulled me down and into her, deeply into her, and I forgot about that, and felt her quivering beneath me, and I was filled with animal joy.

Afterward, she lay with her head on my shoulder. She was unaccountably sobbing, quietly.

"Hold me," she said. "Oh, hold me close."

So I hugged her against the chill of the night.

When I awoke in the morning, Carol was already up, helping the women to gather sticks for the fire. The men—except for the old men—

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were nowhere to be seen. We ate tortillas, standing and moving around the fire, avoiding the shifting smoke.

"All right," I said after breakfast. "Where are we in time?"

"We're not," Carol replied. "As nearly as I can determine."

"Then where are we—period?" I asked.

"I think of it as an . . . inversion."

"An inversion? Of what?"

"A mental inversion. It's as if we've turned our personalities inside out. What is deep down gets exposed."

"My insides are filled with prehistoric Indians? That is who I assume these people are."

"Well, yes. You obviously have a bit of Indian blood in you. I do, too. And we're in America, after all. Don't you think there's a New World topography on the inside of us, just as there is outside?"

"I hadn't thought so."

"Well, truthfully, anything I say is only a guess. I'm an ethnographer, for Heaven's sake, a museum administrator—not a cognitive psychologist or a theoretical physicist."

"Have you spoken to any theoretical physicists about this?"

"No. I haven't found anyone else who . . . I just *knew* you'd be able to come along with me, Edward. There's something that happens when we're together—something not *rational*."

"You've felt it? You've felt it, too?"

"Of course I've felt it. You know, you might even be able to do it by yourself, now that you know the way."

"Through that cave? I don't think so."

"There are *lots* of ways. I only came that way because it was . . . metaphorically correct. I thought it would be easier for you."

"Easier. That scared the shit out of me, going through there."

"Yes, well, fright sometimes helps in finding the way."

"I don't like being frightened."

"There are other ways."

"And I presume there's a way back home?"

Carol was quiet for a moment. "Oh," she said. "Yes. We'll be going back home soon."

But that was when I noticed the pottery. Carol was right, it was fascinating stuff. They didn't turn it on a wheel, but they were able to hand-work it into magnificent shapes. Some of the vessels were so far from having any useful form that they must have been done solely for art's sake.

One of the old men took me aside—his name was Bashi—took me down the creek bank. Not far from the village, there was a little quarry that he'd dug into a clay bank. We gathered clay together and took it back to the village. Then he showed me how to mold it. His fine, bronze

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hands were sure and quick, beautiful tools, gleaming wet with creek water as he continually dipped them to keep them moist. I'd never seen a potter work so fast, turning the clay, working it up and out. He got a thinner, taller pot out of his little dab than many a professional potter I know could have gotten *using* a wheel. Bashi then watched *me* work a pot, showing me a trick here and there. We set them in a wood-burning kiln that Bashi explained—with hand signals and drawings—he fired twice a month, at new and full moon.

And these Indians—my interior Indians—had discovered rakku. Bashi showed me a way to work patterns into the rakku scatter, too, by applying glazes here and there to keep the crazed lines from forming. It was masterful stuff, like nothing I'd ever seen before. Rakku is produced by dipping the hot pot into some paper-like mass. Bashi showed me how he mixed the glazes. He used green straw from the long-leaf pine to get the cracks so fine.

Before I knew it, the afternoon had passed, and the younger men returned. Some of them had been hunting, for they brought back rabbit and squirrel. Some had been on the hills all day—for these were not hills at all, but temple mounds, constructed by the people, one basket of earth at a time. About half the men in the village were priests, Carol told me, and this was a center of worship for a whole river valley. These men had spent the day on the tops of the mounds, burning cedar incense and praying to their gods.

"Seems like a good arrangement," I commented. "The men get to sit around and pray, while the women and the old folks do all the work."

"Yes, well, the men don't do this every day," Carol said. "They work in the fields and hunt. These people are just learning to cultivate teosinte. Soon it will become maize."

"Why are they doing praying and such *today?*" I asked. "Because we're here?"

"Because *I'm* here," Carol said. She took my hand, and led me down to the water. We lay in the sand of the creek bank and pulled the black canoes about us in a "v" for a bit of privacy. We didn't make love, though I wanted to. Instead, Carol seemed sad, and I held her again as the sun went down and the water flowed.

"When morning comes," she said, "do not do anything to interfere with what's happening, no matter how much you want to."

"Why?" I asked. "What's going to happen?"

"I . . . I don't want to tell you," she said. "Just promise me."

"How can I promise such a thing?"

"Promise."

"All right. I promise."

"And Edward . . ."

"Yes."

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"Stay with me. Stay with me until it's over."

"I will," I replied, not know what I was saying. "I will stay with you."

The men came for her in the morning, the priests. They motioned for her to get up, and Carol quickly rose and quietly followed them. She was barefoot. I yanked on my boots and stumbled along behind. No one paid any attention to me. There were more canoes on the creek bank now, many more—all black. Carol got into a large one, with a man at the stern, and a woman at the prow. As they poled away from the bank, the woman began a soft, low wailing.

I dragged my canoe into the water, and joined the throng that was following the boat Carol was in. We did not go far, perhaps a half mile. There was a wide sandbar where the creek meandered, and we beached our canoes there. The two—the man and the wailing woman—led Carol up the bank and toward what I thought was a meadow. But it was not a meadow. It was a field, obviously just tilled and planted. We—at least fifty other people—followed.

At the edge of the field was a line of trees. Carol stepped through the trees. We all stepped through the trees.

And there we stood on an asphalt roadway.

It was crumbled and overgrown, but there was no doubt. This was a paved road. And it was a road that I recognized. The road that went from Gaylesville to Leesburg, and crossed the Little River just north of my friend's cabin. Alabama Highway 273. The W.M. "Country" Brown Bypass.

The people gathered in a circle about Carol. She stood in the middle of 273, on the dash of a fading white lane marker. Hega stepped forward. Carol quickly unzipped her jeans. She stepped out of them. She unbuttoned her blouse and let it fall to the ground. And there she stood naked, white, stippled with brown freckles. Beautiful in the morning light. But so small and vulnerable there. For the first time, she *did* look like a wren to me. A quivering little bird, trapped in our circle.

Both of Hega's hands held small corn seed—teosinte, it must be. These he used to anoint Carol's head, and to scatter at her feet. She stood quietly, a look of sad determination on her face.

After the scatter of the seed, she lay down upon the roadway. She stretched out her arms and put her legs together.

No, I thought. Whatever will happen next cannot, *must not*. But it did. Hega stepped back.

He motioned to three women, who came forward and held Carol's arms and feet taut. Then two men came.

In each man's right hand was a big rock. In his left hand were finely carved chert stakes. Each was about the size and thickness of a railroad spike.

I gasped. This was too much. I stepped forward. The crowd turned to

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look at me, murmured. I saw Bashi, my pottery teacher, shaking his finger, in these people's gesture for "no."

"Edward," Carol said clearly. "Remember your promise."

Hega moved in front of me and gently, but firmly, pushed me back into the circle. He stood beside me.

And then the two men nailed Carol to Highway 273. They put a stake through either wrist, and one through both feet. After the stone points were through her flesh, the men beat them hard and drove them into the asphalt underneath. They crucified Carol Verdane upon the ground.

She whimpered when the first blow was struck, but did not cry out. And after that, no matter how hard they pounded, she made not a sound. When the men were done, they stepped away. The women who had been holding Carol's arms and legs stood up, too.

Hega again scattered teosinte upon Carol and upon the ground. The seed mixed with her flowing blood. Then he quickly turned, as if he could no longer bear the sight, and strode away. The other villagers—to a man, woman and child—did likewise. They cast teosinte grain upon Carol's splayed body, then followed after Hega.

Leaving me. Leaving me with Carol Verdane.

I went to sit beside her on the pavement.

"What has happened?" I said. "What has happened to you?"

"Edward," she whispered. "Thank you for being here. Thank you, my friend."

"I . . . how can I . . . is this the future? Is this the future we have in store?"

"No, Edward. It is what I said it was."

"Inside?"

"Yes."

"I don't want this inside me."

"Inside us all," Carol said. "This is how it happens. This is how we imagined maize into being. Corn doesn't reseed itself, you know. We have to *keep* imagining it."

"I don't understand." I was crying now. Carol's bleeding had slowed. The hot sun was rising. I was crying and could not stop.

"Edward," she said. "Oh, Edward." There she was, nailed to the ground, and she was comforting me.

"It hurts so," she said.

"Let me take them out, the spikes."

"You know you must not."

"Oh. Carol."

"But it hurts," she said. "It always hurts so much."

The sun was hot this day, and there were no clouds. I took off my shirt and used it to shade her eyes.

After some hours, she had trouble breathing. She arched her back and

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gasped for air. I saw that the sun was blistering her fair skin, her fair breasts.

"I'm so thirsty," she said at noon. "I'm so thirsty, Edward."

"I'll bring you water," I said. "I can bring you water." I stumbled from the road, then realized I had nothing to carry the water in, no vessel. I went back and tore a strip from my shirt and doused it in the river.

When I returned, Carol had passed out. I dribbled water on her lips, on her chest and legs. I sat beside her and listened to her labored breathing. I rocked back and forth, thinking of everything, thinking of nothing. Near sunset, she arched her back one last time, could not catch a breath. Her breathing stopped. With a sigh, she lay back down flat against the asphalt.

"No," I said. "Oh God, no." And I had not cried all my tears after all. Sometime later, night fell. I crawled to the edge of the highway, and collapsed into the high grass there.

I awoke to the sound of a pickup truck whizzing by.

No! I thought. They'll hit her!

I sprang to my feet, but it was too late. And not too late.

For there was no sign of Carol's body upon the highway. No trace of blood. I stood there in the empty road and watched the sun rise through the trees, through the kudzu. After a time, I wandered home in a daze.

When I arrived, I smelled pancakes. Pancakes cooking on my stove. I hurried inside, and she was there. Carol was there, holding a spatula over my cast iron skillet.

"You do want breakfast?" she asked.

"How did you—"

"I decided to come out at the cave," she said. "So I could bring the canoe back."

"Was it? Was I dreaming?"

"Oh no," Carol said, not smiling now. "Oh no. Where's your daypack, for instance? Where's your shirt?"

And she was right. I was naked above the waist.

"Will you check your left front pocket?" she asked.

"What?"

"I put my glasses there. I've lost so many pairs—"

I reached into my pants pocket and fished out her glasses. They were intact, but somewhat bent up.

"Oh good. I'd hoped they'd make it back."

I stumbled in, went to the refrigerator and got out the orange juice. I drained almost half a gallon. "What's it like to be dead?" I finally asked.

"I don't remember," she said. "I never remember. I'm just back here. Or wherever I left from."

"Why do you go back?"

"So it can happen."

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"So what can happen?"

"Maize."

"Why . . . what about before—"

"There were others before me, I think. There have always been others."

"And me?" But I didn't really care about that.

"The Morning Star. The Friend to the Sun. I suppose. But you must be something like that, or you wouldn't have been able to go there in the first place. We would not have had the . . . *resonance* we do with one another. The primitive resonance."

"How do you feel?" This was really what I cared about.

Carol laugh and flipped a pancake. "Like a new woman," she said. "I always feel like a new woman after that."

Carol left the next day, for she had to be back in St. Louis for work. For a time—weeks—I stuck to making pots and not thinking too much. That was the best thing to do, the only thing. And I returned the canoe to where it came from in the Carolinas. I did not go back to the cave.

But I *did* try out that new rakku technique, using the glazing methods I discovered over there—wherever *there* is. I'm doing the best work of my life here in this cabin on the lake. But my friend will return soon, and I must move on.

I wonder if Carol was right.

"You might be able to do it yourself, now that you know the way," she'd said.

They killed her. They nailed her to a road and she bled and died.

And she returned. Like the planted maize, she returned.

So much that our lives—that human life—is built upon, made from, is that which is maybe better left forgotten.

Yet humans have shaped pots for tens of thousands of years. We've been molders of clay almost as long as we've been hunters of beasts, longer than we have been planters of grain. There *must* be so much that was lost, but not really, truly lost. So much that is still there, somewhere, inside us, waiting to be rediscovered.

But soon my friend will return from his travels. And then I must decide whether or not I will cross the lake in a black canoe. ●

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yuppie (pre)meditations. with a bullet.

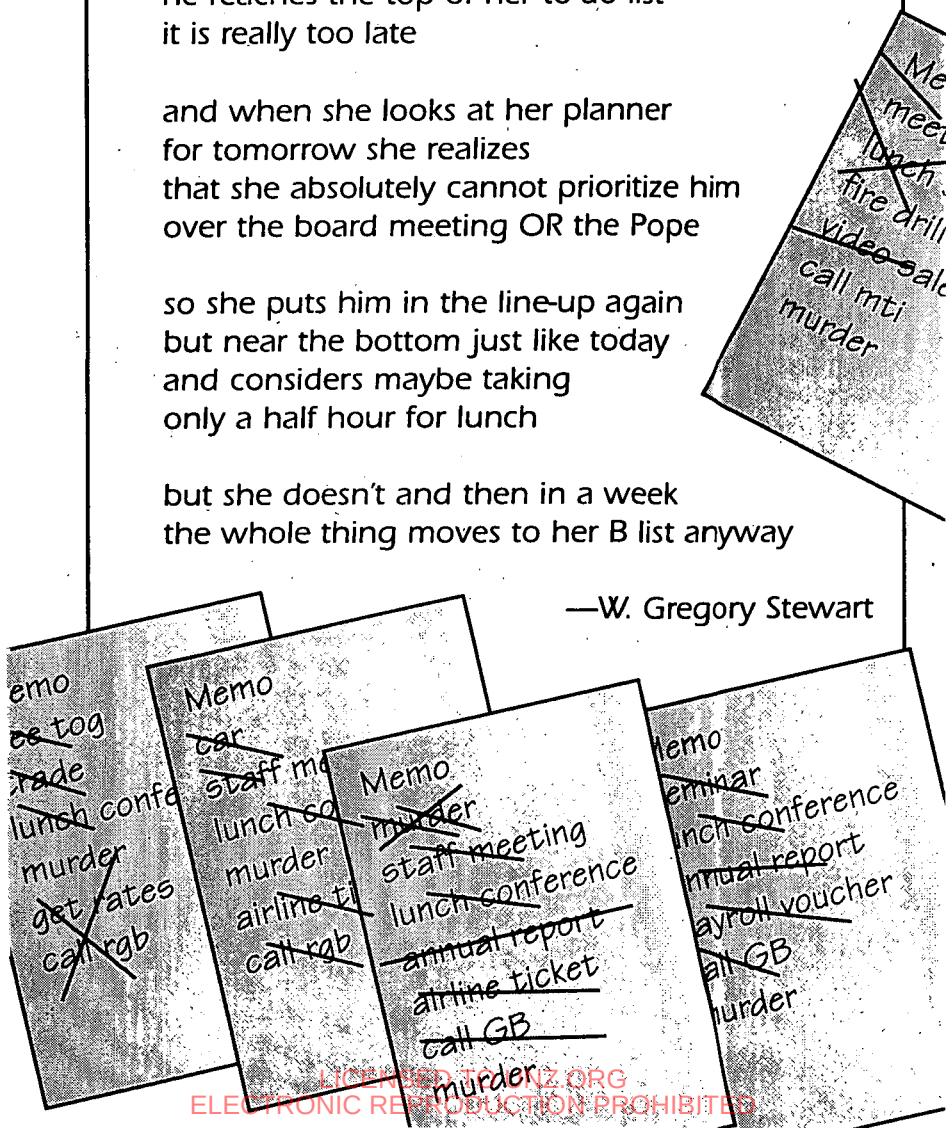
once again she has forgotten
to murder him because by the time
he reaches the top of her to-do list
it is really too late

and when she looks at her planner
for tomorrow she realizes
that she absolutely cannot prioritize him
over the board meeting OR the Pope

so she puts him in the line-up again
but near the bottom just like today
and considers maybe taking
only a half hour for lunch

but she doesn't and then in a week
the whole thing moves to her B list anyway

—W. Gregory Stewart



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include *Darkness, I*—third in the vampire Scarabae series (St. Martin's Press); *Elephantasm*, a novel of India's revenge in Victorian England (Dell); and *The Gods Are Thirsty*, an historical novel of the French Revolution (Overlook). Overlook has also just reprinted the first two volumes of her acclaimed Paradys series: *The Book of the Damned* and *The Book of the Beast*. In her latest story, the consequences of a deadly act are revealed . . .

AFTER I KILLED HER

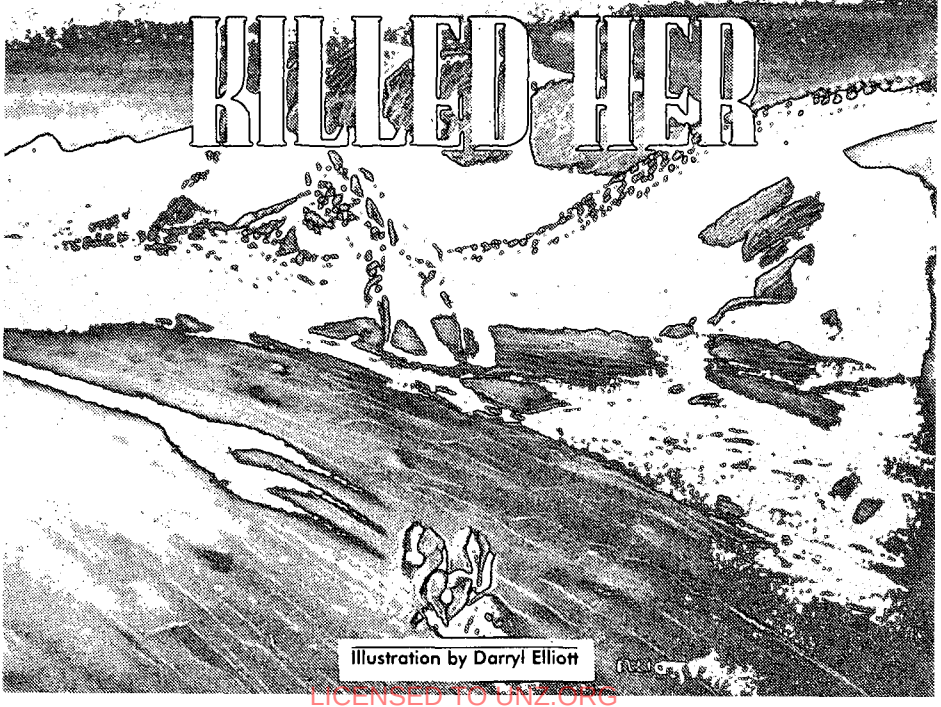

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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My God, if they could see that in the taverns of the north. Would they even believe it? I must be under a spell, or curse, they would say, and perhaps—perhaps I am.

In a way, it's only love. I'm in love with her. Not the carnal love I have known, those white women with their sunburst hair, their thunder-cloud hair. Not that. And yet, it's love. Of course, it's love.

I remember the old man under the tower in that city, the old man they stoned, saying to us all that we were incestuous with ourselves. When the stone struck his head, he died, and the pigeon in his hands flew away.

My love, I will give you the sky, heaven, and earth. And you'll take them.

I'll make sure of it.

All my life, I've been a fighter. From the first brawls in the courts and backyards, to my training in the palace of a king. No one like me. I was proud of my body and my power. Arrogant with what I could do. But though I killed men in combat and on the field of battle, I also took them in friendship. I drank with them and went whoring, and when I wed, I was crazy for her, and my friends drained dry their cups wishing us well.

She perished inside a year. No one's fault, a sickness. But when she was gone it seemed to me all at once I'd never known her. She was like a summer leaf I'd held in my hands, admiring it, until it crumbled. And I was left with only her grave, and there I went sometimes, and talked to her, just as I had in life, about my plans, and dreams, my fights and conquests, and never a word from her. Alive, had she ever spoken to me, beyond the smile, the look, the words of praise, her answers always yes. And finally her little sad whisper, "It hurts me."

So then I took myself off. I went wandering, selling my sword, as they say, which means I sold my self.

I was young and strong. I was tall and well-made. And I took credit for all of this. The death of my wife had been a blow to me, not only her loss, but the betrayal of my golden road, a pitfall the gods should not have set there, for I was lucky.

And still, I clove to people. I felt that in them was the hope of the world. I would love them for their adulation of me, as I had loved my wife, who even on her deathbed had told me I was beautiful, and must find another, she would not be jealous in the land of shadows.

Never idle, not I. When I was not in some war or contest, I assisted the farmers on their land. I laid down stones to build mansions. I filled nets with fish. And women I had, all the women I wanted. Then, glutted with my use of the world, on I went, to kill and love some more.

How many years?—not many. A dozen.

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The morning came, I rode down a mountain, and found a city by a lake.

Above, were groves of flowering trees, and smoke rose blue from thirty or more altars. The water of the lake was pale and full of clouds. The city white as snow.

Yet, there was something. I lingered, wondering what it could be. Everything exquisite, and yet, the seed of something terrible was there. I had learned this precognition from my dying wife.

At last I took the road that led to the gate of the city, which was a great gate of marble. Before I reached it, men came riding out, making to me the signals I knew so well, of respect, recognition, and the wish for my help.

I met them where the gate shadow came down on the road.

"Sir, we judge you to be a warrior."

"I am."

"We need you, then. Are you for hire? The work's heroic though deadly dangerous. We see from your bearing your reward shouldn't be pay, but honorable *recompense*."

Maybe I smiled at that, they were treating me so charmingly. Or not. Can I remember?

But I said I'd go with them to their king.

When we got inside, I looked at the city. As I had expected from the outside, it was a glorious one. Huge marble buildings with gold on the cornices, carved pillars, deep shaded gardens behind high walls. The central avenue was lined by temples and statues, and fountains played into white basins. A pair of brazen lions guarded the palace doors. I'd seen no slums, but then, they take you by the pretty route, when they want you to like them. I was used to that. Anyway, I rose from a slum, and only returned to the hovel where I was born out of curiosity, my parents being dead. By which I mean, it seemed to me then men had no need to stay in the mud and muck even if generated there, since I had not.

The king received me as they do, among a few courtiers and guards. He was very easy, well-mannered, the way kings often are. He told me, once I'd drunk some of their snow-cooled wine, what was wanted.

It was a story I'd heard of, but never before myself come across. Indeed, it's less common now, and my kind are the reason for that.

They favored the Eastern science here, astronomy. And by use of it, their sages had learned of a peril. Across the lake lay a wasteland. It had been there centuries, and they seldom thought of it here, among their groves and vines and gardens. While the width of the lake made sure they did not even closely view the place. But now, something stirred in it. A dragon.

"At first," the king said to me, without ceremony, careful to be at one with me, "at first, we prayed there had been some error. We sacrificed to

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the gods. Then, less than a month ago, from the highest towers of the city, it became possible to see, by night, a red glow out in the waste. You'll know, sir, that a dragon evicts fire. It was the breath of the thing."

I said, "I've heard of dragons. I've seen their graves, here and there, and bones, once."

"We have an oracle," said the king, "A stream of water in a cave. We questioned it. The oracle told us this dragon would prey on us."

"That's usual with them," I said, "in the tales."

"Two nights back," said the king, "a fishing fleet was on the lake. As the moon came up, something rose out of the waste. Many saw it from the high places. A serpent creature with enormous wings. It flew over the moon and passing above the fleet, five boats in all, set light to them with a breath. As the vessels sank, the beast picked three screaming men from the fire, and flew away with them, back into the desert."

"You want me to kill it."

"The oracle, sir, promised a warrior would come."

"It can be done," I said. "But it's chancy. You know that, king."

"Of course. The wise-women make an ointment here used in rituals. It protects against fire—you will be shown proof."

"That's fair."

"We have," he said, "no fighter capable of this conflict. For a hundred years, we've devoted ourselves to the arts of peace. My soldiers are skilled in display. They lack the blood for killing."

I saw what, courteously, he told me. I was a killer, and they were not. I had the knack of it, and the practice, as the slim scars on my arms could evidence, the weapons I carried. The very look of me. Perhaps some faint odor, also like fire.

They didn't want the job. They had never had to slaughter more than a wasp or rat. Those polished men with swords and spears who stood about the chamber, they were nobles. Fight was play to them. Pretend.

Was I contemptuous? I think not. I believed in men, and there was nothing wrong in peace, although my trade had always been war.

Presently they took me to another room, and showed me a cloth painted with the magical ointment put into a brazier, and it was only a little singed. I tried the brew on my left smallest finger, and in the heat, the hairs were taken from my skin, but no more.

When I said yes, like the bride, I was conducted about, shown the gorgeous city all over again from the high roofs of the palace, informed I could have anything I wanted if I won the battle with the dragon. And I was led also past areas with treasures in them, and very desirable women moved across near distances, with lemon yellow hair or hair like midnight down their backs, and that all woven with beryls and silver and pearls, and they sweetly smiled at me.

It seemed to me I could do worse than to settle in this heaven-on-earth.

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I wouldn't mind it, maybe, to be rich and famous and live in luxury. To get a son. To hang up the sword.

As for the dragon, it excited me, the thought of this combat. This was a rare opportunity, for, if it was the last fight, it would be the most memorable.

I'm not quite witless, I did grasp that I might die instead. But there was always that, since I lost my wife, I didn't want to go as she had had to. For me it will always be the lightning flash that's the end. I won't wait for torturing. To die sudden is to die best. Well, I shall learn one day if that is true.

There was a feast held for me in the afternoon. I recollect I continued impressed by the manners and means of the city, but already I was in that state—which some men get through drink or various drugs—the battle-readiness that fills with metallic flame, part fear, part rage, part ecstasy. And through this glow I saw them all, the scholarly king, the delicious women, the cunning musicians, the brilliant painted scenes on the walls.

They told me, too, these people, precisely what the oracle had said to them, falling through its channel, and the priestess heeding its secret voice. That their fate depended upon me.

I rested after the feast, regretfully alone, but I wanted all my strength.

Three hours before sunset, I went down, and they took me to the dock on the lake. Here they made a sacrifice of white pigeons and a white lamb. The king himself touched my forehead with the blood.

There was a boat, and a man to row me over. The monster was nocturnal. He had time to get me across and himself home safe.

This man did not speak to me, I asked him not to. I prefer silence before I fight. But he looked at me, cautiously, under his brows. He was an artisan of the city by his dress, perhaps he'd been selected for the work by lot. It wasn't that he was afraid, he seemed brave enough, for he was no warrior and the dragon was there, somewhere, across the lake. He seemed to expect me to be what I was. And what was I to him? To them all? A machine for death. And this he put on to me. I felt him do it. My garment.

But I'd been used to that, had I not? To being what I was to all the people of the places through which I went.

The sun was low when he put me off, with sword and shield and javelin, at the farther lake-side. He had half an hour to get away. I didn't detain him.

He made a sign to me, a sort of blessing, and rowed off, the wake of the boat cutting through the golden reflection of declining day.

Then I looked about. The shore was dry, with little scrubby bushes, and rocks beyond. And after that, when I got up to it, a plain, rolling and

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parched, reddish in the sinking light, with shadows cast by isolate things, a withered tree, a stack of stone.

Straight I stood, catching gold myself on flesh and helm and weapons, the bitter scent of the ointment all over me. It came to me, the godlike feeling that was with me then, in the instants before engagement. Is there any feeling so wondrous, so massive, so pure? Only the apex of lust, perhaps. But different, for with this power comes other power. I was a giant. A man of metals and lights.

I looked where the land darkened, and there, about a quarter mile from me, I saw a running line of low hills, and in these a gaping hole, black, though the sunfall fell back to it.

There were patches of white along the slope, strewn bones, and I marveled at my eyes which saw them so clearly, the remains of men.

Along with graves, and skeletons of vast girth, I'd seen pieces of their hide, the carapace of dragons. And truthfully, they're nothing. Great snakes, that's what they are, with wings of brittle skin, and ribs in those that may be fractured.

It's their size that terrifies, and their firebreath that does the murder. So I believed.

I went along quietly to my appointment. I meant to get the advantage of the ground, if there was one. But when I reached the foot of the low hills, I saw there wasn't much. The thing must come out and down at me. My other choice could only have been to enter its cave and face it there. I'd had no relish for that, and no time besides. It was awake now, I heard it moving, for the plain was perfectly still, a sound like that a snake makes against a boulder, but very large.

The sky above was transparent, as it is, turning toward the opaque darkness, and the light was in the air but not the earth. A white star stood above the cave. I remember that well.

But when the dragon moved out, the last ember in the west caught it, showed it exact. Like me, it was a beast of metal—coppery gold, with the head and body of a serpent, and a lizard's legs. Only the wings dull and tawny, folded back.

It saw me at once, or scented me and so saw me. I think there would have been little point in trying to conceal myself.

The snake's face had too amber eyes, shining up now as the dark began to arrive. It opened its jaws and a slight rift of fire passed out of them, melting up against the sky. But the fire lit the slope and in that peculiar moment, I noticed the bones on the ground weren't any bones at all, but great white flowers.

Then it began to steal down toward me. It had a creeping yet hurried gait, and the wings stayed shut.

Never before, in all my travels and fights, had I seen anything like the

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dragon. The battle-itch was on me, or I would have been mesmerized. Not fear. Amazement. I had no thoughts, for I don't think in words at such a time. But I'd heard a priest once speak of feeling the presence of the god descend into his shrine, and the priest threw himself flat, gave himself over, and so, he claimed, survived the hour. The dragon was like this. It was beyond all elements, all knowledge. Like the moon falling to earth. What can you do if it does?

Abruptly then it spread its wings and crouched, and the long slender muzzle opened and out came the storm of fire.

I flung up my shield, also anointed, and covered my head and chest.

The fire passed over and around and I grunted at its scald. I was not quite unscathed, but only pricked and pierced, not harmed much, more astonished, for the vitality of this fire wasn't only in its knack of burning up. There was a dazzle to it, galvanic, like lightning. It smelled—*holy*.

Despite the ointment and my reason telling me I hadn't been much hurt, I had rolled over, and now, leaping up again, found the shield had buckled out of shape, and so threw it aside.

The dragon poised, staring at me with its cat's eyes, readying itself for another blast.

As it did so, I balanced the javelin and cast it, with all my craft and strength, straight for the place below the glimmering throat. It went right in, making nothing of the smooth scales at all, and from the wound the wine of the blood burst out, showering the ground and the flowers.

The dragon reared, and now its fire shot into heaven and for a second changed the star to red. Then it leaned over and went down.

I ran to it, and when I came to it, I plunged my sword into the side of its neck, where the heart vein goes up in most things of this or human shape. The blow was violent and sure and almost severed its head, though the neck was as thick as my chest: how many times have I said how strong I am. And the dragon, despite the size, delicate, in its way. It had been easy. Easier than I'd have prophesied, or than their oracle prophesied, no doubt.

When it's done, the battle, especially if it was quick and easy, there comes a shadow, like cold dew.

I stood above it, the terrible foe, and as I watched, beheld the light of evening and of life go from its eyes. It sighed, and closed them, and was dead.

Presently, I sat down at the side of the cadaver.

A few trickles of fire were burning out on the hill. Otherwise night had the plain, and a cool wind moved over in long breaths, stirring the ashes and the flowers, and the hair on my head now the helm was removed. Other stars appeared. And turning, I saw the vague sheen of the city's lamps far off, above the lake.

I need only take my trophy, which in a minute I would. One of the

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forefeet would do, with its claws like jasper. Some lord would prize it, or the king, although he hadn't struck me as being partial to such items.

The wind began to make a strange little crying noise. This can happen. The imagination of warriors isn't devoid of ghosts.

I sat there, looking at the dragon.

Its armor—useless though it had been when touched by my spear and sword—was immaculate. And the line of it, sinuous and slim and curving, and the belly, which now, as the beast had fallen, I could partly study, so burnished, unblemished. And so, finally I saw as well the unmistakable second aperture that told me it had been a female.

I'd killed a living female creature, under that hill. A female creature like a jewelry made for some huge and beautiful throat. The only thing that spoiled her, my dragon, was what I'd done to her. And what I would do, cutting off her forefoot to prove my victory.

I wouldn't do it, then. I'd show them my burns, and the blood on sword and javelin, when I'd wrenched them out of her. Her very absence would suffice to let them know that she was done.

Still I remained a long while, on the plain, sitting by her, looking—not at last at her body—but away into the distance, where the lamps shone, not seeing them at all.

I was conducted to the king in the dark, escorted by torches. He came in a bedrobe, to thank me. Apparently, he had been lying down.

In the morning, after I'd slept, had a bath in a large bronze cavity under a fountain, been stuffed with a breakfast of twenty dishes, by young beauties, one of whom I had, then I went before the nobles, and the evidence was displayed, the ruined shield, the bloody weapons.

One asked me straight out why I'd failed to bring some token.

Taking my stance in the fine frescoed room, I said, "In the north, sometimes, the lords have you cut the hand or head off a man you've slain for them. But I never would do it. I won't now. She's dead. Go and see, if you don't believe me."

The king got up from his golden chair and walked over, and put his ringed hand on my shoulder. He said I wasn't to be slighted. A hero and champion, I'd done what they'd requested. Then he looked me full in the face with clear eyes, the way kings are trained. "We can never thank you enough. What will you have? There's a delightful house with a garden. It was my brother's. Servants to wait on you. I give you the freedom of my city. Anything you want is yours. And of course, I've not yet shown my personal gratitude. Humor me, accept this poor cup—my own, as a pledge." The cup had fat emeralds in it.

I accepted it all. Of course I did. I'd made up my mind to have it. And I knew the courtly language, how to grab nicely. I too had been trained in the palace of a king.

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The house lay just outside the city gates. It had an estate, fields, vineyards, orchards, a forest full of game. On a terrace with marble pillars, two of the most lovely women I ever saw sang to me, brought me wine, and, in the soft velvet of those honey nights, danced willing and laughing to my bed.

When I went into the city, people came out to look at me. They were well-mannered, and murmured, and raised fervent little cheers, and held up their children to snatch a glimpse. Girls gave me flowers. Fishermen brought me their catch, and my attendants received it. "We'd have nothing," they said, with decorous frankness, "but for you, sir."

That was my heaven then. Almost one whole month. But the nightingales singing in my park by night and day didn't secure my dreams.

They weren't the sort you start from, crying out. Not even the dreams that gnaw until they touch the nerve, and wake you, stone-still, with a heart like ice. No, they were only dreams of something flying, graceful, not a bird, and the moon silver on her. And then her long skeleton, that very thing I'd seen before, when I half thought a dragon was a lie. Her living, and her death. Only that. Every night. Over and over.

In the last days of the month, instead of riding into the city in my new wealthy clothes, my collars of jewels, I strolled in alone and plainly. I'd grown my beard. I kept a fold of my cloak over my head.

They didn't know me. I didn't look right. I was just another man.

I watched them, as I'd always watched humankind, as I'd always had to.

They were no better, no worse. They gossiped and bickered, they made oaths by the gods and broke them. They kicked stray dogs, or beat their horses, slapped their wives—all of that lightly. Nothing serious. And the women passed it on, cuffing their children or shouting, or ordering their servants to cuff or shout. They bought flowers for their dinner parties and wine. Next day the flowers were thrown out on the street for the refuse carriers. The wine was a headache, or voided. They spoke the same as all men and women do. They wanted riches and more riches. They wanted safe comfort. They wished to have babies like pets or toys, or they wished the babies would stop arriving, like locusts. They liked this actor in their theater because he could *move* them, despised that one because he was too young, or too old. They were scornfully sorry for others less well off. They hugged their own luck. They feared disease, poverty, lack of standing, or of recognition and respect. Most of all they feared death. If ill befell them they cried, "Why me of them all?" They said at reverses, "This isn't fair on me. Haven't I paid my taxes? Haven't I placated the gods?" When they were beautiful they were arrogant, cruel, intolerant, and uneasy. When they were not, they were jealous. The poorer hated the richer, the richer dreaded the poorer. They spoke politely and cursed each other in secret. They admired what was unusual, a surpris-

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ing tune, a dark rose, a very large gem. Their children wished to be as they were. When they grew up, they too must be opulent, handsome, powerful. The same.

Even the two girls who were my lovers in the kingly house, seeing them together, unseen, I heard them talking of what they'd got and wanted. The presents I'd awarded. The garments they were to have. The babies they would bear—to me?—that they were young, by which, although they didn't know it, they also said in shame and anger, that one day they would age.

This then, all of them. This marvelous city, better than many, just like the rest. And I, just like the rest. The race of mankind. All one.

And not one of us, not one, could fly.

In that other city, I'd seen the mob, and gone into it, and questioned them as to what went on.

"That old fool there," said a youth to me. "He's ranting at us. You see, he feeds the vermin, and fills the streets with their droppings. Filthy. Look, the tower's crusted with them. It could bring a plague."

I glanced at the ancient eccentric. He held a blue pigeon calmly in his hands. But he bellowed at us all in a huge wild voice. He said to us that we were enamored of ourselves and of the race of mankind, and cared only for that. We killed the beasts not only to feed ourselves, but for sport, and where they inconvenienced us, we were merciless. We cut, too, their throats on the altars of our gods who—we assumed—were made in our own image and desired what we did. He declared he fed the pigeons and the mice because he loved *them*. But we were incestuously in love with our own species, and it would be our downfall.

Who threw the first stone I don't know. But it struck him and killed him outright, I think. The pigeon flew away as his hands loosed it. It looked like his soul going straight up to God.

To them, I said I had to make a journey. I'd be back in the spring. The two women wept. These were real tears. One was with child. But so what? It would only be another of us, like her and like me.

Probably I only meant to go on, roaming, as I'd done before.

But eventually I went around the great lake, went right around, it took me ten days, and came into the waste, and so back to the spot under the low hills, the place where I'd killed her, the dragon.

All the flowers were dead too. The summer had been very hot, although it occurred to me perhaps they'd been watered by her urine, and this had kept them growing.

What had I expected to find of her? What I found, I suppose. She'd rotted and the birds had been at her. Not much left. Only the flower-white bones that were already turning brown.

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If they had ventured from the city to inspect her corpse—maybe they had, when they were sure—none had taken anything from her. Doubtless she stank by then. They were a very fastidious city.

For a while I circled her, gazing at her, the leavings. Then something made me go along the slope to the cave. It seemed I needed to see where she'd laired. It didn't and doesn't make any sense to me, not truly. But I climbed up anyway.

The cave was a big bare hole in the stone. There was nothing in it, or so I thought, and then I began to make out a sort of nest, and I took it for her bed. But it wasn't that.

When I stood right over it I saw it was a tomb.

There were four of them, the little ones, young dragons. They were only the length of my forearm, not quite that. About, lay a few fragments of stuff that might have been the remains of birth shell. No debris of the men she had carried off. She must have eaten those elsewhere, to stay her, while she fed her young.

They'd starved. Calling for her—that noise I'd heard, thought to be ghosts on the evening wind—they'd died.

Their snake-skin scales were like the palest copper. Their eyes were shut, and their hungry mouths, with just the tiniest buds of teeth, open, arid for her sustenance, scorched from crying out. Babies. Sons and daughters.

I lifted my head and gave a roar. It hit the roof of the cave and fell back on me and forced down my head again. And on the tomb bed of death and grasses, two eyes, the color of sunset rain, were looking up at me.

In wonder, numbed, stupefied, I reached down and put my finger against the slender mouth. The dragon child bit me, hard, and my blood ran. She sucked. She was female, for so I learned when I picked her up.

The others had lost their essence, were empty. But this one, this last daughter, had somehow survived. Her clutch was weak, but her drawing mouth knew what it did. I held her on my knees, and when she'd had enough, she let go of my flesh, and fell asleep. I could feel her heart drum through me like a summons to another battle.

I built my hut up here, and I hunt here, and in the more fertile land to the south. I cook the food for her now, because, like us, once weaned, dragons are accustomed to broiled or roasted meat. As yet, she can't breathe her fire, but it will come. I see her trying. She puffs up, groaning like a bellows. Not a flame answers, yet from her emits the holy smell of fire's possibility. Then she gives up, and glides to me, and I play with her, rolling her over, rolling with her. I've tried to be brother and father, and mother to her. She sleeps by me. Now the cold's come, we need each other's heat.

She's already the size of the king's largest hunting dog. But her wings

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are brawny enough only for little flutterings. She doesn't go far. At the rate of her growth, however, I believe that the late spring will see her up aloft. And the fire will happen then, too.

Her beauty's painful. Sometimes I sing her songs, adapting the words to her. I even talk to her. She minds my voice. I can see her listening. She makes her own sounds, the notes of dragons.

When she's strong and full grown, she'll begin to prey on men. The city will be directly in her way. Probably she'll also range much farther than that.

I knew this. I mean, not in the instants when I realized she lived, when I fed her my blood, not precisely then. But in the time after. How shouldn't I know, who killed her mother for the identical act?

She must live. And like us, she has to live from killing things. But she does it, you old man, as well you would understand, from necessity, not sophistry or pleasure. And she hasn't any vices. She will live and kill and eat and sleep—and fly. And, if others of her race persist, she'll mate. She'll birth offspring who'll be the same as she is, and want nothing else.

If enough of them come to be, they could destroy the world of men forever.

It's the revenge then, of her kind upon mine. And my revenge as well, upon the world, for making of me what I was.

And, on myself, of course. For I'll be the first. When the day dawns that she has her power, she'll slaughter me without hesitation. She won't think anything of it. The fire will bloom out of her, the lightning flash. If she devours me after, as I expect she will, that's good. I always believed I'd die in battle, wielding a murderous sword, a machine for death. But here, in this waste, I'll die and give life. Maybe not vengeance after all, but payment.

Or better—not pay—but honorable *recompense.* ●

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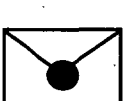

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NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST LEAD STORY

Multiple Nebula- and Hugo-Award-winner **Robert Silverberg**, one of the giants of our field, whose "Reflections" column appears here every month, returns wearing his fiction-writer's hat next issue to give us a quiet but powerful study of a May-December romance of a unique and poignant kind, in the bittersweet "Death Do Us Part."

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Nebula- and Hugo-Award-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** takes us to an embattled future Salzburg for a compelling study of human courage and the persistence of love under even the most appalling and dehumanizing of conditions, in the moving "Winter Fire"; **Karen Joy Fowler,** one of the most respected and acclaimed authors of her generation, returns to these pages next issue after much too long an absence, taking us back into the past for ringside seats at an event that's "Standing Room Only"; **Mary Rosenblum,** one of our most popular authors, returns with a melancholy study of a boy discovering his roots in a troubled future world, as well as tapping into roots of a different sort, in a pavane of identity and high-tech intrigue revolving around "The Botanist"; **Michael H. Payne** tries to decipher "The Language of Ghosts" on a strange alien planet, with life the forfeit of failure; new writer **Emily Devenport,** making an offbeat *Asimov's* debut, loads us into the car along with a cast of very strange passengers for "The Long Ride," with the fate of Earth itself along for the ride as well; and new writer **Judith Berman** makes a powerful *Asimov's* debut, taking us to the lands of myth and legend for a vivid and evocative encounter with "Lord Stink."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column gives us a glimpse of "Tarzan at the Earth's Core"; and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" offers us a study of "Ethnicity"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstand on July 1, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories that are coming up!

COMING SOON

Important new stories by **Walter Jon Williams, Gwyneth Jones, Gregory Feeley, Robert Reed, Steven Utley, Esther M. Friesner, Tony Daniel,** and others.

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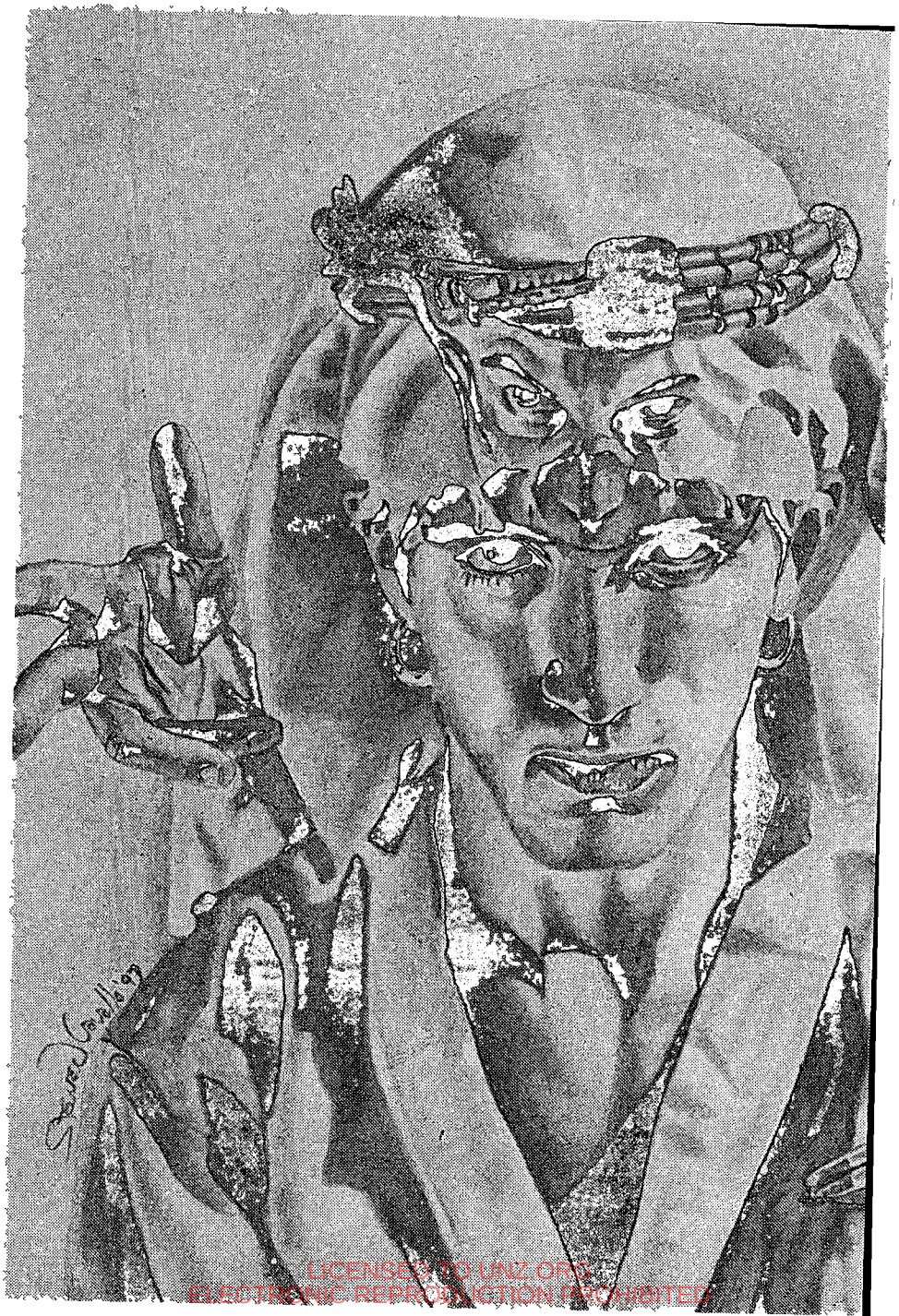

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Eliot Fintushel

IZZY and the FATHER of TERROR

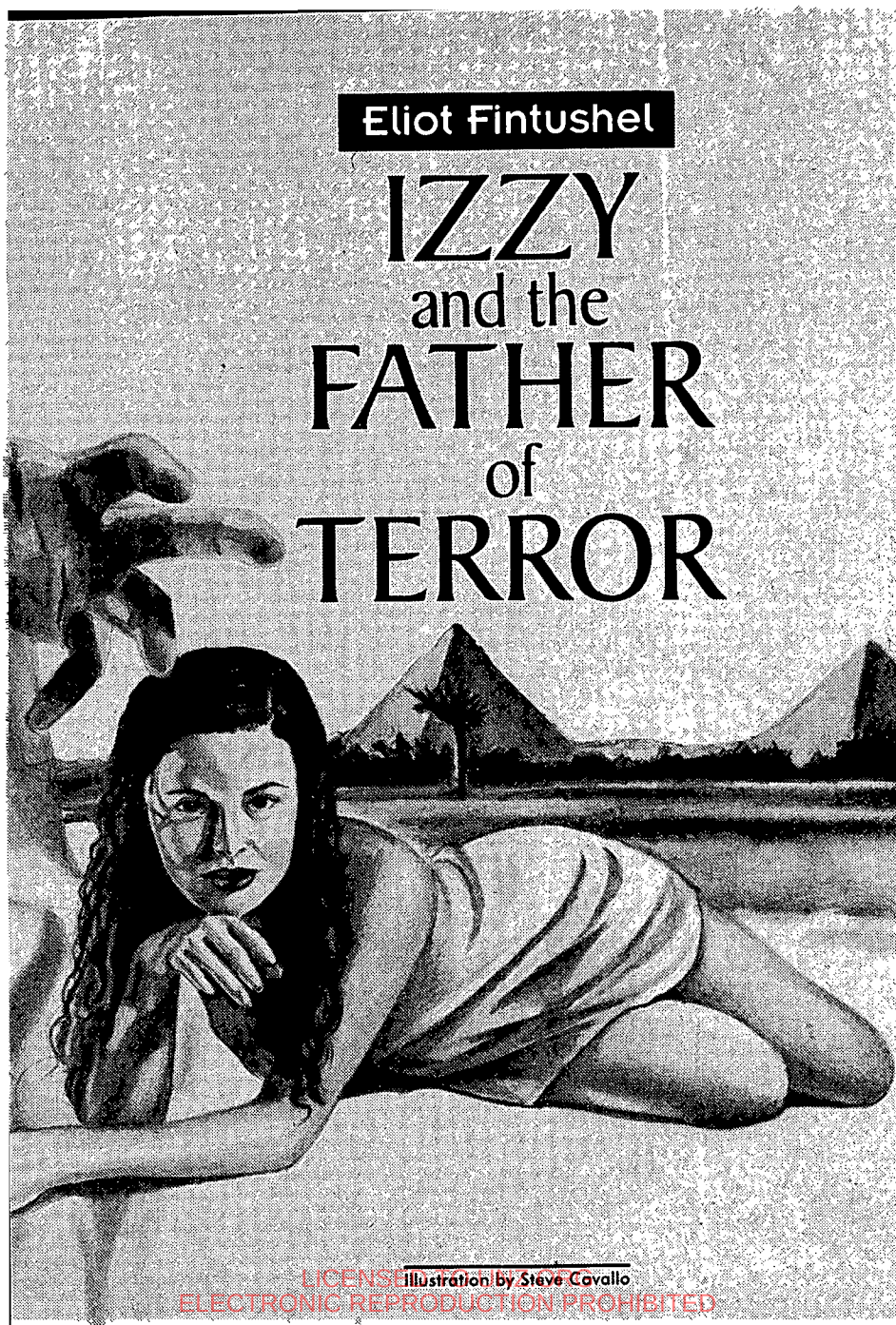

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Eliot Fintushel's latest story is the second in a series about the redoubtable Izzy. The first, "Izzy at the Lucky Three," was published in our June 1996 issue. Mr. Fintushel is a solo theater performer and teacher. Invited to succeed the abbot of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, "I wised up in time to save my soul and good humor, and began writing science fiction instead." He has since sold eighteen stories, most to *Asimov's* and *Tomorrow*. The author makes his home in Glen Ellen, CA, with his wife, *New Yorker* writer Noelle Oxenhandler, and daughter, the inimitable Ariel.

He who feels punctured
Must once have been a bubble.
—Lao Tze (trans. Witter Bynner)

ONE

1. A Hole in My Mind

I was thumbing through New Mexico with nothing, headed nowhere, when I fell in with a shaman named Shaman who pricked a hole in my mind. A little prick it was, but everything gushed in through it, and everything spilled out. Suddenly, I could not tell the difference between myself and others or between my body and the rest of the world.

"Don't be afraid, Mel," Shaman said. I was *very* afraid. We were sitting inside a long canvas tent, the communal kitchen of the Space People. All the other Space People were asleep. They had picked me up outside of Albuquerque and driven me out onto the desert to their little spread. Because Shaman liked me, they had picked me up. Even though there were Chicanos in those days who hated hippies, who conned their way into communes and shot them up, and I am as dark-skinned and small as a Mexican, they had picked me up.

It was dark in the tent. Flaps open, stars filled the big triangles at ei-

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ther end; feeble candlelight unsealed the night between us, loud with cicadas and dead souls crying. There was a votive candle in a shot glass on the dirt floor. Rococo shadows angled and sprawled across chairs, long table, canvas, and ourselves.

"You've broken me." The words jumped where my bones should be. Something in me arched and bristled like a frightened cat. Were the words mine?

Shaman took them for mine. "*I'm you,*" he said. Incomprehensible. "Relax."

I left that place. I left the Space People sleeping. I left Shaman with his kit of tropes that killed or cured or pricked your mind and left you to bleed to death or to drown in the world's blood, bleeding into you through a tiny hole. The last thing I saw there was the candle flame reflected in Shaman's eyes, two little flames dwindling as I stumbled out into the desert, out into stars and the cries of cicadas and dead souls, which might have been my tongue, my voice, my limbs, or my self, since Shaman had pricked a hole in my mind.

2. Talk with a Joshua Tree

I had a talk in the dark with a Joshua tree. I said, "Everything's okay. I have a mother in New York. I have brothers and a sister. My father left us, but he's still in my mind. In there, I can see the faces of all the people in my life, I know the names of everything, and no one on Earth would disbelieve me." The Joshua tree was unconvinced. I couldn't remember my mother's face. I stood there, out of sight of any highway, lost to the Space People, stars in my skin. Someone had just spoken. It might have been the Joshua tree. It might have been the sand.

3. Izzy

Finally, tears gushed. I was sitting on a curb by the highway before dawn. I was dawn, not quite risen over a small, dark man on a desert highway. I was a pool of tears splash-fed by a biped above my gutter. I was a tremble, a sob, a cicada, a dead soul listening in. I don't know what I was. I was a car coming, high beam illumining tear-slicked face, driver coming in earshot of moaning figure, alone in the desert, in the dark.

The car stopped a few yards past me, then purred back. The passenger door flung open, and a man leaned out, balding, single-browed, a skinny man with a nasal accent: "Get in, Jack. We ain't got all day."

I smelled jasmine, sweet and piercing. Inside, beneath a red tassel hanging from the rearview, a small soapstone elephant was lit by the map light above the dash. My tusks curled into the tangle of threads. I

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had many arms. In my hands were medicine bottles, knives, diamonds, skulls, crushed demons, and snakes. A naked woman scissored me.

I was sitting in Ganesha's lap. My legs embraced the elephant's hips. My heels massaged his buttocks. My nipples rubbed his chest. I smiled, but held my lips enticingly distant. The Indian behind the wheel stroked my back.

Or perhaps I was from Pakistan. I was irritated at Izzy. I, the driver, said, "If I had wanted like this, I would have stayed at my motel, Izzy. Do we have to pick up *everybody?*"

"Exactly, Sarvaduhka," One-brow shot back. "That's who this piece of merchandise is: everybody! Ain't you, Jack?"

I pulled my sleeve across my face to erase the tears. The car, a warm shell of light, seemed heaven, but I couldn't find where to say yes from. When I tried to speak, the car door groaned instead. It closed. I was inside, in front, squeezed between the door and the man with one long eyebrow. "How did you know?" I tried to say; instead, the sun rose.

4. Relic Background Radiation

Sarvaduhka pressed a button, and there was the United States of America: news, music, tractor pull ads—"SUNDAYYYYYY!"—static, evangelist patter, a song by Johnny Abilene . . .

There's a splash across the southern sky
Named "I love you-oo!"
And I know just what a big man
Ought to do-yodelayhee-do.
I'm sorry I left you somewhere in the blue-boo-hoo-hoo
With your mama singing lullabies to baby-boo . . .

. . . used automobiles, paid political announcements, weather reports . . .

"Wait a damn minute," Izzy said. "Turn it back to the Haymakers, Duke. I wanna hear that song."

"Haymakers, Izzy?"

"Gimme that." He pushed Sarvaduhka's hand away and manned the radio dial himself. I felt as if someone were reaming my navel. The smears of sound as the needle skimmed the tuner scale were gurgles of cud surging up my throat. Finally he found it. There were the slightly off-key notes and bad mixing that signal a live performance:

I'm gonna bring you right back some day.
Though you may be far away,
I can always pull a little stunt
That the folks call "epoché"

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"*Epoché?*" Sarvaduhka took his eyes off the road—*me*, a flat, black triangle long as the desert, wide as the squareback here, beetling to a point out there, and dotted with my Bott's dot vertebrae—to frown at Izzy. "Did the Haymaker say *epoché*, Izzy?"

"Shut up! I gotta hear this."

Take a long lost dad's advice:
Though yore mama's Guldang nice,
Save a little bit of love for yodelodelayhee-me!

Just then Izzy's beeper went off. I'd never seen one before. I don't think *anyone* had at that time. But Izzy's was beeping. "Not good," he said. He pulled it out of his belt, then held it up close. "Four degrees Kelvin. Shit. It's up a whole degree. He's actually tried it."

"Tried what?"

"Epoché, for crissakes. What have we been talking about—salami? Sarvaduhka, who's President?"

"McCarthy. Why?"

"McCarthy? Still? What color is the American flag?"

"Red, white, and yellow."

"Unchanged. Okay. This wasn't the big one. He didn't manage it. And Mel's still here beside us. Okay. Good. We got time. Johnny's out looking, and we're in the pink. I'm taking a nap."

"Wait. What is four degrees that was three before?"

"Relic background radiation, Savvy. I never told you this? It's like a pilot light. It flares up when somebody does an epoché. It didn't work though. I'm taking a nap." Brooking no protest, Izzy turned off the radio and scooted down in his seat.

"I am driving with a mad man, and still no female action."

5. The Temporary

Thoughts smoked from my skin.

"Is he a werewolf, Izzy?" Sarvaduhka whispered.

Izzy said, "Let me snooze."

I squeezed Mel's eyes shut to keep from slashing too brutally the delicate inner membrane, with my light. Rising open-armed before Sarvaduhka's VW Squareback heading east out of Albuquerque, I bathed them, squinting in the munificence and splendor, till Izzy yanked down the visors.

"Snooze, he wants to snooze!" Sarvaduhka said. "Snooze, Izzy, but when do I get my female action? Everything you want to do, we do. Now we have the boy and you are satisfied. But I still have no female action. I

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never should have left my videos." He pinched a cone of incense from a slot under the ashtray, stuffed it into a compartment in Ganesha's back, and lit it clumsily with a cheap butane lighter. Smoke spouted from Ganesha's trunk.

"You horny bastard," Izzy grumbled, "didn't I tell you, you get some nooky in Memphis? We gotta finish with the kid first, but I'm too tired now. I gotta cop some Z's, Sergeant Ducky. Can you clam it?"

I was terrified. A slug in the kill jar—the sting of jasmine like carbon tetrachloride—I curled away from Izzy's body, my skin electric with loathing. He yawned and stretched. His arm looped across my shoulders. His head lolled against my chin. The feel of that clammy bald spot. I tried to be the sun, huge, distant, omnipotent.

Through the hole in my mind images stuttered: Mayan priest pederasts; surgeons, masked and gloved, their hands in my bowels; Shaman shaking and shaking his head; the Space People, the desert, my father—*Run!* "Please let me out," I said, one of me.

"Shit!" said Izzy. "I forgot this happens." He stopped the hole with his finger.

How did you do that? He didn't hear me.

"Savvy, stop the car," said Izzy One-brow. Sarvaduhka groaned and pulled onto the shoulder. "We get no rest until he's cauterized."

I felt as if I were being buried alive. The sudden constriction, even though it produced a more normal-sized, more workable mind, was suffocating. Izzy amputated the world. As soon as the car stopped, he pushed open the door and shoved me out. He fell out on top of me, wrestled me down. "Sarvaduhka!" he shouted. "Help me."

"Is this legal?" the Indian said. I heard his door open, then slam shut. He was pressing me down. I was scrambling and wheezing after something like breath or like my name, or else I was trying to cough it up. My name, too small for me, was wedged in my windpipe. Izzy was butterfly-bandaging Shaman's hole. Or plugging it. Or welding it. Or sewing it closed.

"This is just a temporary," he said.

I coughed up my name. "I'm Mel Bellow!" I said, astonished, I who had been the sun, the sky, Ganesha's shakti, wind-blown sand.

"We know who the hell you are," Izzy said. "You left home the day after the US pulled out of Vietnam and President McCarthy ended the draft, May 6, 1970, right? Happens to be one of my bench marks. No more sitting by the mailbox chewing on your lottery number, right, Mel? Slam goes the door. Up goes the thumb. *Izzovision*, case you're wondering."

"Izzy, be civil. He is traumatized," Sarvaduhka clucked.

"Sure," said Izzy. Now I could see he was sweating, exhausted, still straddling me on all fours. His sweat fell into my eyes and made me blink. I knew which one of us I was! He said, "I'm Izzy. This guy here is

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Mr. Sarvaduhka, the motel mogul. We're pleased to make your acquaintance. Now let's haul ass back into the vehicle, because we got a lot of miles to cover before we hit the launch site, and the Duke is hot for nooky."

6. Certain Responsibilities Accrue

"My name is Izzy Molson," he told me over watery coffee from a machine at a rest stop outside Amarillo. Sarvaduhka was looking at magazines. "Some people think I'm psychic, other people think I'm psycho, but I'm here to tell you that I'm just an ordinary Joe with his ear to the ground. I'm currently employed at the Gibson plant in Lockport, New York, setting up tool machines, which I got because I lied about my medical history, which you would too if you had a back like mine, and I'd appreciate it in consideration of which, if you didn't wrestle me quite so vicious next time I do you a favor."

"Sorry." I sipped my coffee slowly, just to feel the warmth spread, like dye staining the part of my world that was *me*.

"Forget it. Anyways, I happen to be able to see inside things, like your noggin for example, past, present, and future, regardless of distance—sometimes. Certain responsibilities accrue. Which is why I am spending half of this vacation, which I only get two weeks of at my present level of seniority at Gibson, and my next vacation also, when it comes up, on you. Gawd, I guess there's no limit to how bad you can make a cup of goddamned coffee." He wrinkled his nose and swallowed the rest of it at a gulp. Then he squashed the Styrofoam and threw it down with a shiver.

"Spending your vacations on *me?* What's going on? A guy did something to my mind . . ."

"Shaman."

"Yes! Then you fixed me somehow. That's all I know."

"How can you drink that stuff so easy? You look like you like it! You know, you can tell a lot about various civilizations by the kind of coffee they put up with; that's what I find. . . . Listen to me. Shaman is trying to set you up to be his pabulum, Mel boy."

"He wants to *eat* me?"

"Yes, Mel, he wants to eat you, farm you and eat you. He's tired of hunting and gathering, let's say. He's been living catch-as-catch-can for five, six thousand years, and now he wants to cultivate, raise a family, like. Between you and me, he doesn't know what he's in for in that department, but try to get Shaman to listen to *my* say-so.

"Now, I'm just a little guy, see, but we can play the star guys off against him, because they want you back on Sanduleak."

"Ah."

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"Listen. Shaman's gotta start fertilizing now to plant seeds next year and harvest the year after that, when his larder gets echoey. This is why I have committed two vacations, though God knows there are things I'd rather be doing, named Fay in East Tonawanda. You *kapeesh,* Old Lower Forty?"

"Why do I believe you're not crazy?"

"It is written."

7. Shaman's Farm

Many things were written of which I was unaware then, but where I now live, folks know everything. Time flows differently two hundred thousand light-years from my *old* galaxy. I look up at the sky from Sanduleak, rotating five times a second, and I see there the histories of all the worlds, compiled by epoché. . . .

Shaman chose the womb of a twentieth century North American woman to be born from. Egyptians, he had found, were too hard to proselytize, Indians too easy, Japanese too slavish, Australians too anarchic, but the American bourgeoissie—*perfect.* He magnetized their children, told them tales of Pharaohs and extraterrestrials, himself always in the middle, Tuthmosis, seed of Chephren, son of the Great Sphinx. Compare Chephren's statue and the Sphinx: were not their faces the same? Anciently, as Tuthmosis, he had excavated and restored the man-lion from the stars.

To prove it, he brought down lightning, made stars dance, grew younger instead of older, humped or killed, without compunction, everyone, high and low, male or female, drawing his strength, he declared, from the *Father of Terror,* Abu al-Hawl, the Great Sphinx. He visited the Father of Terror yearly, in El Giza. Travel was difficult, but he had an easier way in mind, more present and more permanent. That is why he gathered his Space People. That is why he drilled a hole in my mind. Many holes he drilled, to no effect, in many souls: the Space People. But at the bottom of the hole in *my* mind he glimpsed *Abu.*

8. Oil of Cloves

"What do I *do*? What am I supposed to *do*? You haven't told me *anything!*"

They were pulling away, about to leave me at the rest stop. Sarvaduhka's squareback screeched to a stop, sending a cloud of dust back into my face. I ran to Izzy's window. Sarvaduhka was gritting his teeth and peevishly chanting, "Female action, female action, Izzy. This is what you

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promised me. This is what my vacation is about. Female action, female action, female action."

"Never mind Sergeant Ducky," Izzy told me through the window. "Jeez! We'll see you next year. You'll live till then, don't worry. I plugged you; that's all I do this time. Just remember, that thing is a temporary. If you start to feel pressure . . . what can I say? Oil of cloves? The Lord's Prayer? My hands are tied, kid. I gotta be back at the plant in a few days or they'll fire my ass, and kimosabe here still has to get his damned female action, and guess what: I just got this. The North Vietnamese just overran the South. A rout. It's all over. Keep this in mind, Mel. It's a good bench mark. Next year we'll plow you up and sow salt, don't worry. Nobody's gonna farm you."

They were speeding away down the on ramp. The sun was so hot, everything was white. I didn't know what to do. I just stood there. I stared at the place where Izzy had been, until my neck got sore. Then I headed back toward the vending machines and rest rooms.

9. Duck-Rabbit

They came back, not in person, but on the juke box. The juke box was in a café on the westbound side of the highway. Once I had urinated, there was nothing further to impel me in any direction whatever. So I wandered across the glass-shelled pedestrian overpass, still dizzied by the physical sensation of something (my piss) actually leaving my body; I had contained *everything* for nearly twelve hours.

There was a juke box at every table. I sat down at the nearest one and fished out a quarter I'd never had. I pushed my quarter into the slot and pressed A-1, "If You Want Some Food for Thought, Take a Bite of This," by Johnnie Abilene and the Haymakers. Out came Izzy.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, Mel, this is not a drug experience," he said. Everyone kept right on eating, while Izzy's voice spilled from the jukes. A lean, sunburned trucker with faded tattoos on each bicep was drinking coffee in front of me, staring meditatively into his own cigarette smoke. A few tables bubbled with tourist families, whom every twang and gewgaw set chattering. A very fat old hippie in tie-dyes and cut-offs walked in and leaned against the mother juke near the cashier; he scanned the listings, the families, the trucker, and me. Nobody but me heard Izzy.

"Can *you* hear *me?*" I whispered into the Wurlitzer.

"No," he said, and laughed. From the left speaker—Izzy was in stereo—I heard an angry cadence, Sarvaduhka's. "Okay, okay," Izzy told him, "I'll be nice. I couldn't help myself." Then to me: "The guy that just walked in, the *zaftiger* in flip-flops, he's from Sanduleak, but he's on our

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side. Just be careful about giving him anything of yours." Static. ". . . in Memphis, I told you. Give me a break, Vaduhka; this is intergalactic stuff here for crissakes and after all you said and done, put me flat out on the run, now you think you got a mess of love to shove in my face—well, take a bite of this!" It was Johnny Abilene. Izzy's voice was swallowed into the pedal string guitar. I seemed to get a whiff of Sarvaduhka's jasmine, then nothing. The Haymakers.

The big man came to my table. "Mind if I sit down here?" I shrugged. He sat. Maneuvering into the chair, he had to push against the next table to accommodate his gut.

The table slid back into the tattooed trucker. "Hey!"—as his coffee splashed onto the table.

"Sorry," my Sanduleak contact said, turning meekly.

"Just watch it, okay?" The trucker threw a napkin onto the spill, then lapsed back into samadhi.

"Sure. Sorry." My hippie turned back to me. "What's your name? I'm Gypsy. I'm waiting for my sister, is all. She's in the head. She takes a long time, I don't know why; she just always does. What did you say your name was?"

"Mel," I said. There was a floating astigmatism, like a skyflower before me, the kind that is pushed away by one's looking, so it's never quite in focus. At first I thought it was in my field of vision, but the more I tried to sweep it to center stage, the more I realized it was a sort of *thought*. A name on the tip of one's tongue. A half-remembered face. An inkling, an intimation, but *of nothing*.

It was Izzy's temporary. My mind-tongue stroked and stroked it with instinctive curiosity, like leukocytes casing a virus, something hard and foreign patching my mind.

"You're looking at my beard," the Sandulean said. "Is there something stuck in it?"

Stroked and stroked it. My father was in there, Gone Joe. Stroking and stroking Izzy's amalgam, it was Gone Joe's fingers I stroked with. He was digging his fingers into Izzy's bung, trying to flee my mind; the rest of him had vanished when I was two, left Mom and me at the gift shop in Niagara Falls. Only this shade remained behind, Gone Joe's shade feeling guilty in the mind of his abandoned son.

If you fiddle with the tracking on a VCR, sometimes you can see another movie just under the one you've been watching. It flirts between the scenes, steals outlines, blurs faces, commandeers bits of dialogue, makes a lawn into a lake, a domestic comedy into a primeval horror—duck-rabbit. Gone Joe's old, blue watch cap wanted to preempt Gypsy's beard.

"Did I get some butter in there or something? Robins lay an egg? What?"

"No. Sorry. You're from Sanduleak, right?"

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Gypsy's jaw dropped. I mean, it really dropped; it hit his sternum, then sprang back, like a bungee jumper. The whole thing took maybe two seconds, during which I glimpsed Gypsy's real body. In there, behind the phony jaw, a yellow snake bristled and shifted. There was a gasp from one of the tourist tables, babble, then hush. Gypsy stood; his hams shoved back the trucker's table.

"Goddamnit, you fat slug!" The trucker slammed down his coffee and stood up. *Gone Joe had penetrated the seam up to his elbows.*

"I'm terribly sorry," Gypsy said. "I'm just fat, see? I'm big. I'm clumsy. I can't help it."

I could see the trucker's face cloud. It was a new one on him. He paused. He frowned. He said, "Ain't you got no pride whatsoever?" He sat down again and mopped up spilled coffee with another paper napkin. He cussed under his breath, then said, "Just be careful, get it?"

"I get it," Gypsy said. "Thank you very much."

"What in the goddamned State of Texas you thanking me for, fat boy?"

"Here's my sister, Nora," Gypsy said to me, sotto voce. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life came right up to our table. She stood there next to Gypsy, with her hip in the cleft of Gone Joe's chin. She looked impellingly familiar, but I was drawing a blank; whatever she had been to me was occluded by a sliver from Izzy's bung.

10. What It Feels Like to Be an Angel

Even the trucker had to stop mopping and look. How could a brother like that have a sister like that? It wasn't her cup size or complexion. Oh, she was pretty. She was very pretty, in a domestic sort of way. She wore boot jeans and a large T-shirt. Her hair was a tangle of brown cascading halfway down her back, with here and there a strand of silver. Her mouth was wide, the lips full, her dark eyes clear and intense. Her face was washed by sorrow, like a stone worn smooth by water. *Compassion,* it said. *There* was her beauty.

The way Nora walked, the way her eyes moved, effortlessly, without a trace of affectation or desire, everything about her won me. Hers was the secret face I put myself to sleep by. I loved her immediately.

Even Gone Joe stopped clawing for a moment. A cool wave spread through the café. The tourists stopped jabbering and breathed. The trucker stubbed his cigarette.

Gypsy pulled out a chair for Nora, and she sat down. Gypsy sat again, carefully. He said to her, "He knows."

Our eyes met. When she breathed, I breathed. She seemed to nod, and I understood that she was acknowledging our kinship. "How?" she said. "Please tell me how you know about us."

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Her voice thrilled and pacified me at once. I thought, *This is what it feels like to be an angel.* Through her voice, as through a channel, I felt down inside her, to where her voice came from. I felt the blood bathing in oxygen inside her lungs. I felt the quiver of her vocal chords, the undulations of her tongue, the way the cartilage in her nose resonated with each vowel.

"I've been through a lot," I said.

Nora's forehead wrinkled ever so slightly. With exquisite concern she sighed, "Oh!" She reached across the table and laid her hand on mine. It was all I could do not to burst into tears. "Tell me," she said. "Tell me, *Mel.* Tell me everything."

11. My Debriefing

"I'm twenty-three. I'm from . . ." I couldn't remember where I was from. "I took off because I wanted . . . *you,* Nora." Saying that was like coming. She just kept looking at me, unruffled, like a calm ocean, a sunset, a mother, the moon. "I wanted *you,* and you weren't there in . . ." I drew a blank. "So I started hitching around. My mom is . . ." What *was* Mom? "Well, of course, I didn't *tell* myself I was looking for you. I was headed for Yucatán to see the eclipse. I was headed for Atlanta to visit the Coca-Cola factory. I was headed for British Columbia to live off the land. I was headed for the Grand Canyon to learn the ways of the Havasupai Indians. That's how it was. I remember once . . ." I hit a cul-de-sac; my sentence had nowhere to go. "Anyway, I love you. When Shaman picked me up . . ."

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" Gone Joe was punching and prying Izzy's bung but making no headway. Detritus from the operation was scattered all over my mind, I realized. There were little lacerations too, creating lapses and blind spots randomly. It had been a quick job.

"Go on," Nora told me.

I concentrated. "Go on," I echoed. "Yes. The Space People picked me up and gave me something to eat at their place, just tents and a few goats and chickens out in New . . . New something. York or Hampshire or Mexico. Orleans, maybe. Did I say I want to be one with you, utterly and completely, forever?"

She nodded.

"Mm. Then I was alone with . . ."

"Shaman," Gypsy said.

"Thanks. With Shaman. And he said some words that made a hole in my mind. But Izzy fixed it."

"Izzy!" The word sprang from Gypsy's mouth like air from a burst tire. As he stood, Gypsy's jaw dropped again, this time to his knees. The flesh

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unpeeled from his chin to his navel like tape rolling off a dispenser. There was the snake, yellow and glistening. It turned inside Gypsy's human façade like an uncoiled intestine. A shadow of displeasure crossed Nora's face, and she reached over to roll up Gypsy's chin. She just started it, and Gypsy was shamed into finishing. No one had seen that one but us. Looking at the blithe tourists checking out at the cashier's, I thought of all the bizarreries I might have missed in my life, just in my peripheral vision.

Look, and it's rolled up.

Gypsy tucked his shirt in and sat down. Nora said, "Mel, tell us how you know Izzy."

"He and Sarvaduhka,"—Gypsy didn't stand up—"they picked me up back in New Whatever, in a helicopter or a car or a train or something. It had an elephant in it. Jasmine. He sealed up Shaman's hole. I feel a lot better now, but I've got like shrapnel in here. . . . Yes, it was New *Mexico!*"

Nora smiled at me, and my heart turned to Silly Putty. "Don't you have something you want to give us, Mel?" she said.

"Not that I know of. And Izzy said be careful."

"That's the limit!" Gypsy shouted. He slammed his fist on the table. The hand flattened and cracked away from his wrist. No blood. A grey tendril, like an octopus's, poked through. "He has to have his nose in everything. I'm gonna kill him, Nora. I'm gonna eighty-six that scum bag. We come nearly two hundred thousand light-years to this backwater solar system, and Izzy has to gum things up, put in his two cents, jimmy everything in *his* direction. No, Nora. No, no, no! No more!"

Suddenly, Gypsy remembered where he was, and he froze. Moving only his eyes, he sneaked a glance sideways. The tourists were watching. The cashier was watching.

The trucker had just returned. He was sidling up to our table with a fresh, long-stemmed red rose in his hand. He gave Gypsy a nasty squint, then turned to Nora. "This is for you, ma'am. I got it in the gift shop. You're the nicest dang little thing I seen on this highway since 1957."

12. Liftoff

I'm pretty sure I didn't say this out loud: "Help me, Gone Joe! Please don't go. Help me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. I don't know what I'm supposed to be. Things are turning strange." I often prayed to Gone Joe when I was in a spot. Once I was alone in my high school locker room with a fullback who wanted to kill me for correctly naming the capital of Massachusetts, after he'd embarrassed himself by saying, "Idaho." Another time I was alone with a girl in her bedroom, during a sweet sixteen party with no adults around. In both cases Gone Joe gave me the same advice, and I took it; he said, "*Run!*"

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But now things were different, because Gone Joe had his fingernails at the edge of my mind, and there was a chance he would escape completely. "Don't bother me, kid," he said. He was in up to his shoulder. I was looking right through Gone Joe's cuff, squeezed up his arm past the elbow now, at the trucker's back. The trucker had gotten his smile from Nora and was walking away. The tourists, alarmed by Gypsy's *sforzandi*, were pushing through the door into the glass tube over the highway, right through Gone Joe's overalls.

I must have been mooning at Nora, my brows bunched skyward, head cocked like a dog's at the table. My Gone Joe was getting goner. "Poor Mel," Nora said, straight to my heart. "You've been very brave. We knew you were being harrowed. We've come to stop it, to help you. It isn't right. Shaman is a bad man. And powerful. How did you ever get away from him, Mel?"—her hand on my forearm, her thumb stroking the inside of my elbow.

"I just left."

"He didn't follow?"

"No."

"I don't like this," Gypsy growled.

"You're right," Nora said to him. "We should leave. We don't know what Shaman might be up to. Get rid of the other human. We need to take Mel up with us."

"Right." Gypsy shook off his clothes and skin, steamrolled to the cashier, opened his hingeless snake maw and swallowed the fellow whole.

"It's all right," Nora cooed, making it all right.

The cashier was a great lump in Gypsy's throat. Gypsy slithered upright to the walkway door. His human body dragged along the floor like a pair of half-discarded Doctor Dentons. He licked the jambs and the seam between the glass doors, causing them to melt together. Where his tongue touched, smoke shot out. I saw the passage accordion away from the café like a portable airplane tunnel. Cars were braking and screeching below. Then the liftoff.

"You worthless fool," Gone Joe said. "Izzy told you not to give them anything, and now they're boosting your ass to Sanduleak." Gone Joe was catching his breath, double, in Nora's eyes.

Gypsy undulated back to the table and pulled his skin back on, just like a scuba diver stretching into his wet suit. The cashier was less prominent now; Gypsy's digestive juices must have been formidable. "Forgive us if we don't do a ten-nine-eight," he said, once he had his mouth back on. The floor shook. "Goddamn Izzy Molson. One of these days I'm gonna put him *right here*." He tapped the dwindling lump in his midsection.

Nora clucked and shook her head. "Gypsy!" she moaned.

I looked through Gone Joe at Gypsy. "But Izzy said you were on our side," I said.

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"I am," he said. Outside, through the window, Earth was a smoky, blue agate, then a dot, then invisible in the solar blaze, and the sun too was dwindling.

13. What You Can See in Texas

It's amazing what you can see from a highway rest stop table, especially in a place like Texas, where people tend to let it hang out more. Hitching west, that's one of the first things you notice: how much more at ease folks seem to feel with themselves out west. They let you catch them scratching their navel or adjusting their hang or spitting or mopping sweat from a cleavage. It's okay by them. There's so much more space out there, west of St. Louis, and people are a lot more self-contained. They know they can just get up and go somewhere else if they damn well feel like it. Listen to western music. Listen to Johnny Abilene and the Haymakers, for example. They don't take shit from anyone, bosses, lovers, fathers, children . . . "take a bite of this."

Once, over a Swiss Miss, in a Panhandle rest area, I saw a woman and her husband duking it out on the back of a flatbed pickup. That was the best cocoa I ever had. Nobody got seriously injured, though their five kids, pasty, bleak, skulked in looking like war orphans. In New York, you'd see couples swap *looks*, and you'd notice their kids squirm a little—that's it, that's all. If one of them raised their voice slightly, everybody in the restaurant would turn and stare. Somebody would dial 911, sure. In Texas, three people would have to be murdered first.

You see more.

14. So Was the Sphinx

They were talking about me.

Gypsy said, "You see? He's paralyzed. He can't do anything. Everything goes in, and nothing comes out. He has no idea what he is. He doesn't remember anything deeper than the Milky Way."

"Shush," Nora said, "He can hear you. You'll upset him."

"So what? It doesn't make any difference. Look at him. He's not even here."

"Poor baby. Still, that's it for Shaman. He can't do this twice. Mel is his feed hole. Shame'll starve down there. You can take Mel back to Sandy. He'll be a hero."

"What hero? They'll build a museum around him. Put him in a glass case. He doesn't know what he is, Nora. There's nobody *in there*."

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"That's because of Shaman. He blew Mel's mind, is all. It's like the Sphinx before Tuthmosis: half-buried in the sand."

"What mind?" Gypsy said. "I'll bet he cut it off himself when he was a baby, like a trapped rabbit gnaws its foot off. Maybe it's an impediment down on Earth to be what he is. That's what made it so easy for Shaman to put a hole in."

"Izzy tried to patch it. Look."

They leaned into my face like oral surgeons. Gypsy waved his phony fingers in front of my eyes. I just felt numb. I didn't want to respond to them yet. I wanted to keep thinking about things I'd seen at rest stops in the west, on Earth I mean.

"It's a temporary," Gypsy said.

"Yes. Sloppy work."

"Goddamn Izzy Molson!" Gypsy said. "Hey, wait a minute! What's that?" I felt Gypsy's finger come straight in through my eye to nudge a spot near the filling.

Nora said, "Gone Joe. Guy in Mel's mind. Looks like he's trying to squeeze out."

"Typical. Lot of damage in there, but it's small stuff, non sequiturs, lacunae, causal gaps, the usual. It'll heal. Izzy's bung won't last more than a few months though. You want to insert anything while we have the chance?"

"For heaven's sake, no! This is a sovereign *person,* Gypsy."

"The hell he is! He's just an extremity, *Abu al-Hawl*'s blow hole or something. The Mel Bellow personality thing is just static, a TV ghost. Shaman's feeding through him, Nora. The guy's nothing but a junkie's vein."

"You're beginning to sound like Shaman. . . . Look! He's coming round. Get your hand out of there!"

I started to "come to." I had been reluctant. You don't try to land in a volcano. I had plenty of fuel left inside my mind, plenty of things to think about, vivid, fascinating. I didn't have to join Gypsy and Nora in this impossible reality. But then I heard Nora defend me to him— "a sovereign person"—and things felt much safer.

I made my entrance: "Where are we? What's going on? Why is it so black out there?" I pretended to be woozy at first, for the sake of continuity. Discontinuity is a terrible enemy of one's sense of selfhood.

Gypsy looked at his wristwatch, if it was a watch, which hung half through his wrist, if it was a wrist. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "We're about a hundred million miles out."

Gone Joe said, "*Run!*"

"I don't want to be here," I said.

For some reason, this sent Gypsy into a rage. He stormed over to the bus tray station and overturned it, shattering dishes and launching silverware. "Sure. Let's just turn around. Let's take you back to Shaman.

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Maybe we should garnish you with parsley first. I think there's some in the goddamned kitchen."

"Careful, Gyp, or you'll jar us off course," Nora said, like a nanny admonishing a fractious toddler. "Have we reached the Magellanic Stream?"

"Not quite." Gypsy stood stock still and glared at me. His fury had distilled itself into a poisonous timbre.

"Let's do an epoché. We want to make sure Shaman can't catch up. Go into the kitchen and use the automatic dishwasher."

"But Nora . . ."

"An epoché, Gypsy. I'll see if I can get the *rabbit's foot*."

"Ah!" Gypsy turned on his heel, on his fake heel, and shouldered through a padded, swinging door into the kitchen.

"You're safe with us, Mel," Nora said. "You know what Shaman would do to you on Earth. Izzy told you, didn't he?"

"Izzy'll be back in a year," I said. "That's what he told me. On his next vacation. He hasn't got much seniority."

I felt better with Gypsy gone. I looked around. Except for Gypsy's mess and the fact that a few tables remained to be bused, everything looked fine. There was a map of U.S. Route 40 on the wall nearby, with colored lights at the rest stops and interchanges; ours glowed red. The condiments station had plenty of ketchups and mustards, though the relish was getting low; maybe a few more of those tiny paper cups would help, in case of a rush. There were kitschy oil paintings of long-horned steer and cacti over the empty tables. The one over ours had a campfire in the foreground with a circle of chiaroscuro bronco busters; one of the cowpokes had a guitar in his lap. Near the stack of salts and peppers at my elbow, there was a display explaining how you could get prints of the Western Landscape Series for your very own. Everything was fine. Everything was okay.

But out the window . . .

"Mel . . ." Nora said. What is that moment between a man and woman when he starts to see her face as *skin*, the pores, the sweat, the small swells and hollows that he will fill, swell for hollow with his own? When his eyes become *tactile* organs? When her breath warms the air between them, and they feel themselves drawing nearer, like buns proofing under a warm, wet towel?

"Nora, do you look like him underneath, like a snake or something?" I said.

"Didn't Izzy tell you?"

"No."

"*Run!*" Gone Joe clamored.

We were leaning together like tin leaves in an electroscope. Our knees touched. "Mel, why don't you know what you are?" Her nose grazed mine. We rubbed. I groaned.

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"Shaman wants to eat me," I said. "How do I know you won't eat me too?"

"Why would I eat you? I love you, Mel." She kissed me. A purple dye seemed to swirl through the room, tinging everything. The walls, tables, paintings, juke boxes, bus and condiment stations, cashier's desk, melted as they changed hue. Everything shrank and became cylindrical. I felt her kiss in my stomach, in my toes.

She peeled her lips away slowly. I wanted to cry. She was tearing my heart out. She never broke eye contact. We were in some sort of space vessel, it seemed like. I was a hundred million miles from home, I think. There wasn't a single fact I could rely on. I looked around. As soon as Nora stopped kissing me, the spaceship looked like a rest stop café again.

I said, "I was hitchhiking . . ."

She said, "So was the Sphinx."

15. Your Mother Never Did This with *My* Belt

Gone Joe was like a man half-buried in the sand. He had grunted himself into the hairline fissure between Izzy's bung and the lip of Shaman's puncture. The tip of one fingernail—the ring finger of his right hand—was actually protruding from my mind. It dipped in and out of my field of vision like a phantom scimitar, like a crescent moon, or like a glint off troubled water, half-hypnagogic, half-real. Sometimes, pressing hotly against Nora, my cheek slid against her cheek, and I was lost in the jungle of her wavy hair. I opened my eyes, as if to breathe through them, so breathless did normal air leave me then. I blinked out the window into the daunting black, star-speckled and streamered with burning lights, and I caught Gone Joe's moon, at home in the cosmos and traveling with me as the moon follows a traveler on Earth. It seemed distant and large; really, it was near and small.

Gone Joe's nail scratched things. It scratched Nora's long, perfect flank. She seemed to like that. She uttered a small cry that I could feel vibrating right through my breast bone as we undulated together. I was straddling Nora on her chair, like Ganesha's shakti. I lapped her and thwucked breast to breast and belly to belly with my shirt pulled off. We were tongue and palate smacking. I tore her T-shirt up over her head; during the seconds of eclipse, when Nora's face was inside the T-shirt, I was panic-stricken, desperate to see her again. Without her eyes, I was *perdu*. Embracing her, I tried to swallow her through my whole skin, to engorge her like an amoeba. It enflamed and infuriated me that she was outside me. She groaned and kissed.

Gone Joe kept appropriating parts of Nora. He was superimposed on her, like shower screen lilies on a bather. Once, when she smiled and

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blinked—I had made hungry babies' mouths of my palms, pulling at her breasts—the movement of one eyelid was Gone Joe's mouth: "*Run!*"

"What?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "I love you, Nora. I've always loved you."

To Gone Joe, inside, I said, "Stop it! Shut up! Go away."

"You're crazy," he said. "This chick is a geek. You saw her brother. She's a pit viper inside, and yellow! Not to mention, we're in outer fucking space. She's *using* you."

"What do you want me to do?" I said inside.

"Is something wrong?" Nora asked me. She started unbuckling my belt.

"Kill her. Strangle her. Get away. Get that boa constrictor in the kitchen and run us home with the automatic dishwasher, right? That what she said, the dishwasher? You know how to use a dishwasher?"

"Dad . . ."

"Don't call me that. What's she doing with your belt? Pay attention to me, will you? Get control. Pull your pants back up, damn it all to hell! Hers, too! What's she doing with your belt? Your mother never did this with *my* belt. Mel, if you don't stop this and get us out of here, I'm going to give you a headache you'll never forget."

Suddenly, Nora jerked backward, toppling the chair, with me on top of her. "There's a finger in the air," she shrieked. "It's pointing at *me!*"

16. Planting My Flag

"Please, Dad, get back in here," I said out loud.

"Don't call me that," he said, inside me. He was out, though, from the tip of his right forefinger almost to the knuckle. It was hairy near the bottom. It was heavily callused, a workman's finger.

The finger did not come out of my head. If you followed it back from the edge of the nail, across the lunule, the joints, and the knuckle, it didn't terminate anywhere; you just eventually found that you were looking past it toward something else. It wasn't distinctly *placed* in three-dimensional space, but hovered somehow against it, solid, yet incommensurable. Gone Joe's finger was not coming out of my head. It was coming out of my *mind.*

"Gypsy, what *is* this?" Nora squirmed under me on the floor.

Gypsy poked his head out the kitchen door, the human head, the one with eyes and whiskers. "It's Gone Joe!" he said. Gypsy pushed through the kitchen door. It snapped and swung on sprung hinges, creaking as he strode to us. "God damn Izzy! He really botched it. A guy's leaking out of the kid's mind."

"Mel, Mel," Nora said. She held my face between her two hands. "Make

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love to me, Mel. Make love to me *now*." The finger was playing mumblety-peg around her head. She turned to avoid it, back and forth. "You don't need Gone Joe, Mel. You don't need Izzy. You don't need anybody. *Take* me, Mel."

"Yeah," said Gypsy. "You're the only Earther for half a billion miles. Plant your flag, Mel."

Gone Joe's wrist showed, his forearm, his elbow, one shoulder, then his neck, chin, face—scrunched like a newborn's—and the watchcap, drenched with my thoughts. "*Run!*"

Holding me on top of her, Nora nudged the chair away with her hips. Gone Joe was someplace indeterminably near, in our way, but not fatally so. I had to have air. My senses burned and beat as if on smelling salts. I wanted to toss like a netted fish. When I arched up to take in more air, I saw the window above our table fill with rosy, supernal light.

"Shit," Gypsy barked. "It's Shaman."

17. Smiling and Serving

Shaman had a voice like incense. It permeated us. His words were not the main thing. The words were trails in a cloud chamber. It was something else that moved us, the things that *made* the trails, powerful, terrifying, *small*. Waves of meaning effulged from Shaman. Striking our minds, they crystallized into words:

"He's mine. You know that."

Gone Joe was out up to his navel. "*Run!*" Both arms were pushing against the edge of my mind, the meaty part of him making no way, but the part still cerebral gaining purchase and levering his body still farther out.

Gypsy pranced idiotically from table to table, reaching high and low, trying—impossibly—to place himself between my eyes and Gone Joe. Where Gypsy stretched, an occasional crack formed, revealing the slither inside his clothes and skin. But he didn't want me to be distracted by Gone Joe. He wanted me to concentrate on Nora.

"You love me, don't you?" Nora bumped her pelvis up against mine.

"Yes!" Despite everything, I started humping. The floor was cold, hard linoleum. My knees hurt from pressing and jamming with Nora.

Shaman thickened among us. "Stop this," he said.

Gone Joe said, "Stop this!" too. He was out up to his knees. He was wearing his blue mechanics' overalls with the embroidered tag on the breast pocket. In the middle the tag said, "JOE," and around the perimeter, "SMILING AND SERVING!" There was a Niagara Falls souvenir pen behind it. It had an illusionary moving picture of the Horseshoe Falls on the barrel.

Shaman wasn't ruffled a bit. He sounded like someone trying to talk a

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suicide down from the ledge: deliberate, calm. I heard him with my skin, between pulses of blood, between breaths, between thrusts and red thoughts as I mortar-and-pestled Nora: "Now, Gypsy, now, Nora, you *must* stop. You know this. The Earther's one of my Space People now. He's a part of me. Don't fuck with me, Sanduleans, or there'll be hell to pay."

Nora was fondling something besides my buttocks. She was stroking something inside my mind, a part of my mind invisible to me, as the nose is to the eyes. She stroked as you might stroke a dog to make it let go a ball. Of what ball did she want me to lose hold?

Shaman said, "Does the Earther know what you are to him, Nora? This isn't Sanduleak, you know. Some things are frowned upon in this galaxy."

Gypsy emitted a blast of red vapor. His skin ballooned outward like a swollen calf's belly, and exploded. The wet shards settled. Some stuck to the ceiling and walls, where they slid and dripped. He was the snake, or a gigantic yellow neuron, more like, bulbous at the bottom, grey dendrites like Medusa's hair tangling on top.

"*Run!*" Gone Joe rasped. He was out.

And I was out. I couldn't stay inside Nora any more. Soul and body were shriveling to a bead. I couldn't *act*. Nora groaned disappointment and withdrew from my mind, leaving the ball in whatever jaws held it there. Gone Joe took one look at Gypsy and beat it into the kitchen.

"Did you get it?" Gypsy asked Nora. He used his whole reptilian body for a tongue.

"No," she said.

"You see," Shaman gloated, "the boy's not like you Sanduleans, Gypsy. You'll come in anyone, won't you, even your mother? In fact, especially your mother, ey, Gypsy?"

"Damn! How did you get here, Shaman?" Gypsy yelled. "I know you can't epoché worth spit."

"Didn't have to," he cooed—from the kitchen, sounded like. And there, at the swinging door, where Gone Joe had been a moment before, stood Shaman, his features melting from Gone Joe's into the ones I had seen in the New Mexico tent, by candle light, like a dry, crushed sponge duck springing out in water. "I came along in *him*, Gyp. A little reconnaissance. I figured someone like you would try to spoil my party. You're trumped, Sandulean. Thanks for the ride, Mel."

"Are you my father?" I said.

"*I'm you.*" Incomprehensible.

18. You Are My Sweet Burrito (Please Be True)

Many years later, on Sanduleak, collapsed by then to a neutron star, a

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pulsar, in the Large Magellanic Cloud, I happened to hear the following song by Johnny Abilene and the Haymakers. Folks live on bebop there, always have, always will, but on the station I was tuned to they liked to interrupt the Top Million every now and then for a little down home Country Western, especially tunes that have to do with *me,* since I am a sort of galactic hero there, or mascot, more like.

The Sanduleans are funny that way, like Bible thumpers on Earth who like to pepper every exchange, however secular or banal, with references to the Gospel:

"Can you believe it, Ethel? They charged me three-fifty for one pair of athletic socks at the Spend-and-Save. I felt like turning over their table."

"Render unto Caesar, Georgette."

"Praise the Lord!"

On Sanduleak they say things like this: "as tight as Gone Joe in Izzy's bung." Or when they just almost get something they want, but fail at the very last moment, they often say, "It was like Mel and Nora in Texas."

The number was announced as "You Are My Sweet Burrito (Please Be True)," I think. Things go by very fast on a neutron star, and the news came on right after:

I won't call you "honey," 'cause you know you're not that *sweet,*
Or "knockwurst," though you knock me offa my feet.
You're a sight too lumpy to be my "cream of wheat."
Yes, you're just my salsa verde sweet burrit-
O! Please be true.
Don't leak on my place mat.
Just be you
Underneath that space hat!
You popped from my heart like refries out a tortilla.
Pretty mama, I'm hoppin' happy to be here and see ya.
Just like Mel when Shaman popped outa his mind,
I'm a durned sight spun-around, run-around loco behind.
But if you're true to my dream,
I'll be your sour cream,
My roly-poly holy guacamole sweet burrito queen!
Please be true, true, true!
Won't you please be true?

(The phrase "space hat" in the eighth line refers to the pleated headdress popularized by Abu al-Hawl, the Great Sphinx at Giza, a sort of interstellar thinking cap he used for performing epochés. It became quite fashionable among Earthers of the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty [circa 2500 B.C.] who lived in the vicinity of his landing site. On Sanduleak, it's still *la look.*)

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By the way, what Shaman said is quite true. On Sandy, when a singer calls his loved one "pretty mama," he generally means just that.

19. Lingua Franca

"Let's be human, shall we?" Shaman proposed. Diplomats settling on a lingua franca. "You have a spare somewhere, don't you, Gypsy?"

The big nerve undulated to the cash register and punched "NO SALE" with one of his dendrites. He pulled up the tray inside the cash drawer, where the big bills are usually kept, and produced a squeaking mass of rubbery material that looked like a deflated beach ball. He started to pull it on like a pair of pants. When he was done, he was the rotund, superannuated hippie I'd met down on the highway, and fully clothed.

Nora squeezed my hand, then headed for the little girls' room to tidy up. "You're okay, Mel," she said. "We'll get through this together." Then to Shaman: "The toilet?"

"Go ahead," Shaman said.

"I'll be a minute. We'll sit down together when I get back. You'll let him be till then?"

"Of course, Nora. What do you take me for?" He was wearing Gone Joe's overalls. It still said "JOE" on his pocket, and "SMILING AND SERVING."

"Oh, stop it!" Gypsy said. "Just because she's an Earther doesn't mean she's stupid. She was thoroughly briefed when we recruited her, Shaman. She knows all about you, old Tut. She knows all about everything."

Gypsy offered me his "hand." He helped me up off the floor, then sat down at the table with me. Shaman joined us.

Nora was in the bathroom. She had been in the bathroom when I first entered the café, when I saw Gypsy, when the juke box played Johnny Abilene and Izzy—"*Take a bite of this.*" What did she do in there? Maybe she slipped in and out of fake bodies the way Gypsy did. I still ached for her, but I couldn't do anything about it. I was a small, brown nothing. Shaman was tall and muscular, with strong, chiseled features, a square jaw, clear blue eyes, thick black hair neatly trimmed. He wore a white caftan and loose white linen pants; one leg was still soiled by errant thoughts—e v a p o r a t i n g—from my mind. *Shaman* could have Nora whenever he wanted to, and finish the job, I thought. My mind was a barber pole, thought-blood, endlessly supplied, spiraling endlessly down.

I listened to Shaman as a radio "listens" to a broadcast. It went through me. I should have been crying, but, though I looked and looked, I couldn't find my tears.

* * *

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20. Inoculation

"Izzy Molson can't help you, Mel," Shaman told me. Gypsy twiddled his thumbs and snarled under his breath. "*I'm you.* And you're not what you think you are, Mel. *I'm you.* You didn't consummate with Nora, Mel, or you'd know how right I am. *I'm you.* She wanted you to explode inside her, and not just your sperm, Mel. *I'm you.*" I felt like a cow being milked, helplessly and dumbly chewing cud. Shaman squeezing my udders, his fingers sticky with my milk. The hiss of milk spray into Shaman's bucket. The pressure inside me dwindling. Chewing and chewing.

Then Shaman whispered: "*I'm you,* Mel. They want to pull the Sphinx up through your mind like a baby gorilla out an aphid's pussy, so they can install him in the Magellanics. *I'm you.* Is that what you want, Mel?"

"You make me laugh." Gypsy turned on Shaman suddenly. "The arrogance! You think you can bore into him right here in front of my face!"

"But I *am.* He's mine, old Gyp. You can't do squat zip. Look at the poor worm. Even if you got him to Sandy, *he's* not Abu. *You* make *me* laugh, Sandulean."

"Shaman, the only reason I let you get this far is to inoculate him against you. Now he'll recognize what you do." And Gypsy slapped me sharply across the face. It stung. My ears rang. The flood of awareness made me conscious all at once of another, deeper violation, and I swung my gaze toward Shaman as if I were wielding a shillelagh.

He drew back, startled. There was the slightest hint of fear, then it passed like the moon shadow of a wisp of smoke, and Shaman was his own again. He smiled a studied smile. I withered.

"I see," Shaman said to Gypsy. "You want to take away my farm."

Nora careened to the table and stood over Shaman. There was blood smeared on her neck, down her arms, and across her chest. "You've been at him. You said you wouldn't."

"Shaman tried to drill him," Gypsy said, "right here in the Magellanic Stream. Mel threw him out. It was funny, Nora. You should have seen it. Mel bounced him!"

Shaman shot back, "It wasn't the Earther. It was *him,* it was Gypsy using the boy like a hand puppet. The boy is mine. He has no will. He has no self. He is nothing. He is my straw, my chocolate flavor straw into the mind of Abu. This had nothing to do with you or with anyone on Sanduleak or anywhere else in the Magellanics."

"You're wrong, Shaman," Nora said. "Abu is our father as well. Please don't pretend you don't know that."

"I'm no menace to your galaxies. Why can't you live and let live?" Shaman pushed away from the table and stormed to what used to be the glass doors leading to the pedestrian walkway. He stood there, staring

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out into black space. Gypsy applauded sardonically; Shaman's was the gesture of a Shakespearean actor.

"Nora," I stuttered, "you're covered with blood."

"It was that tattooed man," she said, "the one who gave me a flower. He must have been in the men's room when we took off. He stayed there and hid, apparently. I heard him through the wall. I had to kill him."

21. If and Only If

"Vampires!" My mind rattled like a dryer on three legs; Gypsy's slap had knocked to center stage the bubbles from Izzy's quickpatch. Thoughts jostled and non sequitured inside. I ran behind the salad bar and inched back and forth along the sneeze guard, ready to fling dressings at any attacker.

(These days, when I get an audience with Izzy, he likes to give me a lot of grief about that episode. He calls it the Intergalactic Food Fight.)

There wasn't much Russian left, but I was hoping to do some damage with the Roquefort and Italian, if I had to. I thought the vinegar in the Italian might blind them for a moment. The lumps of Roquefort cheese could slow them down. I could make for the dishwasher and fly us home, beating them back with ladles and meat cleavers and stuff that I found in the kitchen.

But the cheese was probably fake, I was thinking, or skimpy. I might be doomed in interstellar space by larcenous highway restauranteurs. "Vampires! Stay back," I said.

(Intergalactic Food Fight—IFF. It's a pun. "IFF" is also short for IF AND ONLY IF. I had to suffer and be a maniac ignoramus so that Abu al-Hawl could get a ride home and Johnny Abilene could ascend to the throne in the Small Magellanic Cloud; once I did all those stupid little things I had to do, the big matters inevitably resolved. IFF. Izzy knew it.)

"Vampires! Stay back!"

"This should be interesting," Gypsy drawled.

Nora walked toward me slowly. "Trust me, Mel."

"No." I picked up a metal bowl of ruffle-cut beet slices and threatened her with it. "You killed that trucker. Did you eat him, Nora? Gypsy ate the cashier. Are you fighting over who's going to eat *me*?"

Shaman laughed. "You shouldn't have slapped him, Gypsy. Now he's awake, such as he is."

"Mel . . ." Nora kept walking toward me, undeterred by the beet slices. "You shouldn't distress yourself over blood. Bodies aren't important, Mel. Don't you remember? You were almost *there* with me. . . ."

"No more love-making!" Shaman warned. "*I* can do an epoché too, Nora, and you might not like how you're greeted where *I* would take you."

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"You wouldn't dare," she said, without taking her eyes off *me*. "You don't know how, Shaman. You'd turn the world inside-out. It would be the end of you." She was more beautiful than ever. The blood somehow appealed to me now. It made me tacitly aware of her neck, her chest, her arms. I was hungry for her, starved to the marrow. She kept coming.

"What should I remember, Nora?" I said. Then she would be mine.

"Remember the Sphinx, called Abu al-Hawl!" Shaman shouted. "Remember he who made Chephren. The Sphinx is *still* thumbing, and in all these millennia, none of you Sanduleans has managed to pick him up. Stay put, Nora. You could wind up in some waterless place for a long time, Nora, and there'd be no WC."

Gypsy burst into flame. "*I'm you,* Shaman!" he said.

"The hell you are. Don't try that on *me!*" Shaman pointed at him, thrusting his arm as if it were a fire hose, and the flames whooshed out.

"What *am* I?" I said. I dropped the beets.

(The Haymakers still send me tribute every three hundred years: uranium juke boxes, fake books from all parts of the universe—*with performance rights granted,* since they know I like to gig on the acousticals Johnny gave me in Giza—music boxes with their songs transposed to Larmor frequencies, and so on. Three hundred years is a long time on Sanduleak, but for most of my galaxy, it's a blink; Johnny and the boys are tremendously grateful to me, even though I really had no choice in the matter, and if I *had,* frankly, I wouldn't have helped them.

I know that must sound pretty crass, given that the Italians were using Abu's head for rifle practice during World War II, among other indignities that Ylemic Lord had to suffer during his captivity. Still, I thought of myself as an individual being for most of the time I was in the Milky Way. I didn't think that the Sphinx was of any importance whatever! Deluded as that may be, I think you could call it a mitigating circumstance: not guilty by reason of insanity, Your Honor. I was looking out for Number One, so I thought, as if there *were* any.)

22. I'm You

"You are *Abu al-Hawl,*" Nora said, "the Father of Terror, *Rahorakhty,* Sun God of the Two Horizons, and I am Queen of Punt, the land of incense, the land of purified desire. Gypsy is my servitor. Shaman is a foul grave robber. Abu al-Hawl, thou knowest *everything.* Abu al-Hawl, Soul of the Great Sphinx, *Ka,* I invoke you."

Nora was looking straight at me, but I could not believe that it was me she was talking to. She was talking *through* me, as if I were a phone tube. Behind her I saw Shaman laughing so hard he had to support himself against the glass door. "Tell the boy what you like to do in water clos-

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ets, oh corpulent Queen of Punt." He made for us, stumbling and guffawing. He placed himself between us, one hand on the sneeze guard, the other on Nora's bloody shoulder. Gypsy rose. "Tell him how you have to watch water swirl in toilets or sinks or maelstroms, wherever water goes down, oh Queen of the WC."

"You call it a toilet," Nora said. I couldn't see her face now. Shaman was in the way. "You think that makes it something profane. I tell you Shaman, whatever is, is an effulgence of Abu al-Hawl, whose home is Sanduleak and the stars, but who dwells in all thoughts and all things. All that swirls, swirls down to him. Feces and incense are one to him. Who shuts himself off from one shuts himself off from all."

Shaman spun to face me. "*I'm you,*" he said, "*I'm you, I'm you,*" and the old feeling returned: a dumb, helpless beast, I was, stroked and prodded by my master.

"Remember, Mel," Nora said. "Remember the desert. It wasn't New Mexico, Mel. It wasn't New *anything*. It was Egypt, Mel, not a day or two ago, but five thousand years ago." Gypsy worked the ersatz flesh down his snake's flank and moved toward us, his hard, small eyes fixed on Shaman.

I blinked and strained for a thought that seemed just beyond my reach. I *had* seen pyramids in the sand, Nubian slaves, teams of men laying massive *ashlars,* granite facing stones, on jagged tiers of limestone. It had been somewhere between Albuquerque and Española, not far from Saqqarah, somewhere around Abu Sir, Cairo or Santa Fe . . .

"*I'm you,*" Shaman said. Gypsy's ichor-dripping, black maw yawned behind him. I smelled the stink of Gypsy's breath. I had seen *Chephren* on Route 25, whose face was just like mine, just like the Sphinx's. And everything historians and archeologists had written about the El Giza Sphinx was wrong. I remembered—But how?—*King Chephren had not fashioned the face of Abu al-Hawl to resemble his own. It was just the opposite!*

Gypsy was closing his teeth together with Shaman in the middle, but I overturned the salad bar, tumbling steam trays of soup, shattering bowls and jetting forks, knives, and spoons into Gypsy's tongue and palate, or what passed for tongue and palate. Shaman, wet with Gypsy, laughed. "*I'm you!*" he was saying. "*I'm you! I'm you!*" Nora cowered away from him, from me. Gypsy fell back.

Yes, it was I, the Sphinx who had fashioned Chephren in his, in my likeness—not the other way round—just as I had fashioned Mel, and a million other emanations of my Ka, the sacred Ka of Abu al-Hawl.

23. Abu al-Hawl

I had everything I needed there: maps, music, food, sanitary facilities, amusing art works on the walls. In the gift shop there were games,

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books, trifles aplenty, even T-shirts with my own likeness—weathered countenance, sandblasted by a myriad storms, pecked by shells from MP 40's, jimmied block from ashlar and jammed with concrete in dullard "restorations"—*cum* space hat, in day-glo pink. Enough truck for my long passage beyond the realm of the living. At the rear of the main funerary chamber were twin rows of sacred fountains, one beyond the sign of "MEN," one beyond the sign of "WOMEN," swirling water eternally present at the touch of a silvered lever, the symbol of the devotion of Isis for Osiris, or of the Queen of Punt for Me. I had entered the Stream, neutral hydrogen smeared by tidal forces across two hundred thousand light-years between the Magellanic Clouds and the Milky Way.

Wherever My gaze falls, if the soil be fertile—this is what I realized—*beings spring up in My likeness. Their thoughts are but foam on the waves of My mind. Each little creature is a door into Me. Seeking Me, they seek their true self. Invoking My name, they will come home in Me.*

Come, then, Queen of Punt, ring my loins, receive My pollen. I will open into you. I crawled toward Nora over Gypsy's slithering hulk. Shaman was pinned underneath him. "*I'm you!*" he pleaded in a tinny, squeezed voice. Nora opened her flower around me like Ganesha's shakti. *Lo, I destroy you from inside.* "Bodies aren't important," she moaned. *Mine is the maelstrom you have sought.* I swirled into her. *You could not hold Me on Sanduleak. You could not detain Me in the Magellanics. My life is greater than that.*

Gypsy coughed and spat black blood. Shaman struggled out from under him. "You're still down there, still in Giza, still on Earth," Shaman told me. "*I'm you.* I stopped you there, Abu al-Hawl. *I'm you.* I held you as a man holds a morsel with his fork, then cuts and eats. *I'm you.* This being here is a flake of your dried flesh, a leaf trembling in your wind. *I'm you.* This being here is Mel, little Mel, will-less Mel, the hitchhiker through New Mexico—*I'm you*—through whom my pipeline has been laid. I speak to you, Sphinx, as one shouts through a cavern to a man buried in stone. You are not *here.*"

The sun burned my back. Desert afternoon. I was seated in a huge limestone ditch. Between my paws, where Tuthmosis's stela used to rise, tiny creatures teemed. They stared up at me, and I felt the pressure of their dreams against my stone skin. I had pressed my dreams into Tuthmosis (now *Shaman*) two thousand years before: *Uncover Me, Noble One. Remove the sand that girdles and swallows Me. I shall make you king.* He had dug me out, I made him Pharaoh, then he betrayed me, anchored me to this claustrophobic world by the very power I had dreamed into him. Now his stela was gone, its ground defiled by vulgar feet, but Tuthmosis still lived.

He was speaking to me in a mosquito's voice, from an impossible distance: "I speak to you, Sphinx, as one shouts through a cavern to a man

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buried in stone. You are not *here*." Little people shuffled, jabbered, clicked and flashed in the shadow of my headdress. For the thousandth time, I perceived, Tuthmosis had changed his name. Like snake skins or like locusts' hulls clinging emptily to the barks of trees, his old names polluted history. Now he was "Shaman."

"*I'm you,*" Shaman said. A huge block rumbled and fell from my shoulder. The tourists scattered. "Sanduleak couldn't hold you, but Earth will. *I* will. You are not in the Stream, Great One. You are in the desert near Nazlet El-Semman. Gypsy and Nora are the grave robbers, not I. They want to take you back to Gypsy's galaxy, Abu al-Hawl, but you are so happy in the sand! You are so happy to be my sun, my blood, my radiance, my eternal source! The little brown man in the starship humping Nora is Mel, not you! It's Mel, and the child he is making in her is a pitiable monster, a monster, Great One, and not the child of your Mind, not the vehicle of your mind seed, not the vessel of your radiance. This was a mirage. *I* am that. Tuthmosis is that. Shaman is your vessel. *I'm you.*"

I felt heavy, very heavy. I had no desire to move. I was being slowly drained. Perhaps that was good. Perhaps it would lighten me. I scanned the crowd of little people skirting the chunks fractured from the fallen limestone. They were hysterically running east toward the tourist buses. Only one person remained at the site of the ancient stela. With great difficulty I focused on the small man between my paws. He was wearing a T-shirt with my image in day-glo pink, and behind that, the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren in blue. He wore Bermuda shorts and a pith helmet. There was a camera hanging by a thong over one shoulder and a canteen over the other. In one hand he held a shopping bag that said "Nefertiti Bazaar."

Large wraparound sunglasses covered his eyes and part of his forehead and nose. He peeled them from his face, and I saw the brow, one brow arching over both eyes. "Well," he shouted, "it's been a year, just like I told you, and here I am, Melly-belly. Don't time fly!"

24. Not the Memphis in Tennessee

"Looks like you've got a little dandruff there." Izzy scattered slivers of limestone with a playful kick. "And one of us could use a shave. But my cork held, didn't it, bubeleh, in spite of all the bad-mouthing from various cosmic adventurers I could mention?"

He took a few snapshots of me—*Click, flash!*—mopped his forehead, downed a swig of water. The suck and gurgle of the water smacking back into the canteen when he pulled it from his lips. The distant murmurs of tourists huddling back as soldiers herded them with batons. Millennia whispering by: sand, wind, sun. . . .

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"So, you like it here or what? Sarvadhuka's going nuts in the novelty shops and brothels. I told him he doesn't get a disease or induce any pregnancies—*Izzovision*—so now he's taken out all the stops, if you'll excuse the expression. He got so burned when he found out that the Memphis I promised him nooky in wasn't the one in Tennessee, I felt I had to share some information, to make it up to him.

"I like the weather station on your rump, by the way. Getty Institute, right? No, don't bother to answer. That's all right. Don't exercise yourself, kid. That would *really* freak the tourists. As if it wasn't bad enough having a piece of your shoulder fall off and then seeing a lunatic like yours truly gabbing at Old Stoneface here as if he was an old acquaintance.

"You just take it easy. Shaman talks a good game, but he can't do nothing for a while yet. I'll come back after nightfall. Me and Sovereign Duchy was just casing the joint thisaft, bagging a few collectibles and that. Don't say goodbye. Don't say thank you. Don't say a thing, Great Abbadabba."

A moustached soldier in khakis and beret with a Kalashnikoff slung over his shoulder grabbed Izzy's elbow to escort him from the Sphinx enclosure, the hollow I formed about me when I first crash landed on Earth and created human beings, a long, tiring process from the initial joining of nucleotides through the evolution of humans, through whom I could actuate my mental processes, and eventuating in the birth of Tuthmosis IV, on whom I believed I could rely, but consciousness has its own intrinsic imperatives, so here I was, anchored in this blank, vasty shoal, cut off from the stars my home, and utterly dependent on the ministrations of a punch press operator from Lockport, New York.

Somewhere on the wind a mite was buzzing: "*I'm you! I'm you!*" I felt *so* tired!

TWO

25. The Mysteries of Monophysitism

Izzy did not make it back that night. He was being detained, I learned, in an Egyptian hoosegow. Sarvaduhka ran the message over to me. He had to pay one of his Cairo prostitutes one hell of a *baksheesh,* he said, to guide him, on the back of a camel, through Nazlet El-Semman over to the western funerary complex, and on to the enclosure, *my* enclosure. *Mastaba* by *mastaba* they crept. It gave Sarvaduhka the willies.

Sarvaduhka's guide was a Coptic Christian, Lila Kodzi, who discoursed on the mysteries of Monophysitism at the most inappropriate moments.

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Sarvaduhka complained about it. He seemed to think I was God. He told me everything. At the moment of orgasm (Sarvaduhka's orgasm—*she* didn't have them) she would curse the Council of Chalcedon, some fifteen hundred years past, and she would vociferously affirm, in excellent English, the *one* divine nature of Christ, as Sarvaduhka twitched and spasmed, emitting expletives in three Sanskrit-derived languages.

Sarvaduhka and his shakti huddled at my hindquarters as lights flashed brilliantly on the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren and on my own disintegrating limestone hulk. It was just at the end of the late Friday night sound and light show, the German language one. The show must have been impressive for souls with human bodies and eyes, but all the information was false. As I said, it was *I* who made Chephren, and not the other way round.

26. What We Can Learn from Linguini

There's nothing like a few thousand years in the sand to give you a certain sense of perspective. Something deep inside me had loosened up in the millennia since my New Mexico adventure, which, I now understood, *preceded* the Fourth Dynasty just as much as it followed it. Don't let the dates fool you.

The people who wrote down the Bible understood this kind of thing. Look and see: Genesis, XIX:3, for example. Lot bakes matzohs—Passover bread—in his house in Sodom. But this was before Moses, before the exodus from Egypt, before Passover started, with the unleavened bread the Children of Israel baked in the sun while the current Pharaoh was saddling horses. Israel (i.e., Jacob) hadn't even been born yet. So what was Lot doing baking matzohs back in Sodom?

If Izzy has taught me anything at all, it's that clock time isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes five P.M. comes a week or two before six, and sometimes they're simultaneous. The so-called excluded middle is positively a jungle, teeming with unenumerated possibilities. And causality, so far from being the one-dimensional line that Kant and even Hume talked about, is as wild as linguini on a rolling boil.

Where I now live, for example, on Sanduleak, the surface temperature is three or four hundred times what it is on Earth or Mars. Since Sandy went supernova and contracted to a neutron star, it's a thousand degrees Kelvin—*in the shade!* That makes things go pretty fast. By Earth scale, a decent life span for a citizen on Sandy is maybe a quadrillionth of a second. It feels like a long time here. You'd think a bridge like that could never be gapped, that Earthers and Sanduleans could never communicate, and you'd be right except that, in this man's universe, there is no absolute standard. We have a sliding scale. And I mean *sliding!*

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The Earther Protagoras had it right:

Man is the measure of all things.

Well, not Man, but Mind really, not to be anthropocentric. All those scales and numbers and laws of science are just hypostatizations of something that actually belongs to the realm of Mind. Mind made them. Mind measures them. Mind compares, adjusts, interprets, changes. That's what the epoché is all about, for example. That's why Shaman was such an imminent threat even from a couple hundred million miles away, even if it had been *light-years* away—*c* is *not* the top speed in this man's universe, not when you can do an epoché. Nature is a lot less rigid than that, believe me.

Look at linguini.

27. Dualism

"Mel, is that you, Mel? *Abu al-Hawl?*" Sarvaduhka was whispering into my hindquarters, the pyramid of Chephren at his back, and in between, Lila Kodzi and two camels tethered to a rock. "I can't believe I drove you in my VW Squareback on Route 40. Is this you? Izzy says you are the Father of Terrors from before the pharaohs and that you have shepherded the dynonucleic acid ancestors out of the primal soup down to modern Homo sapiens such as I myself, Sarvaduhka, that you are the progenitor of all life on Earth. *Izzovision.* Is this the truth? You did not appear this way to me in New Mexico or Texas. I hope I did not offend you, Great One, by anything I may have said or done at that time, *Om Shantih.*"

Lila said, "Sir, you're talking to a big stone."

Sarvaduhka ignored her. "Izzy couldn't make it, oh Terrible One. He is being held by the authorities here. They think maybe he is a terrorist, but Izzy says not to worry. He asked me to give you this message, Ineffable Ancient Great One.

"Number One, he apologizes that his gambit did not work exactly as planned . . ."

"Number One, Number Two!" Lila Kodzi slapped Sarvaduhka on the shoulder. "He's been rehearsing this all the way from Cairo. Number One, Number Two! Bah! There is only Number One! Is this not so, Ancient Greatness? All is the divine holy Christ Nature, and the divine holy Christ Nature is one." Now *she* whispered into the clefts of my badly mortared posterior.

The sound and light show had reached the reign of Cheops. People here seemed to consider that fairly ancient. They should have seen the first lungfish. They should have seen the nucleotides I netted from the asteroid belt, how I landed them and nursed them, turned them inside-out,

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left-to-right, and said to Myself, "Let us make Man." *That,* they could more justly have called "ancient."

"Quiet, whore!" Sarvaduhka said. Lila grumbled. Sarvaduhka went on. "Number One, Izzy wanted the Sanduleans to save you from Shaman, but not to take you so far away from Earth. So, that didn't work out so well, and he is sorry, Greatness."

"He's right here," Lila said. "What—*far away?* Obviously, you are a dualist."

"I am *not* a dualist. I am your *employer.* You don't know what you are talking about, Lila. The Mel Bellow person is in outer space somewhere."

"I thought you said he was the Sphinx now."

"Yes and no."

"Dualism."

"Quiet, whore!" Sarvaduhka honeyed his voice. "Number Two, Izzy requests that you employ your vast powers to bring Johnny Abilene to El Giza. This appears to be the only way that you can be saved from eternal slavehood to Shaman, who is also Tuthmosis IV."

"Dualism."

"Lord Abu al-Hawl, Great Beneficent One, please make the whore shut up."

28. Who Am I?

I bolted upright, like a stricken dreamer. "Who am I?" Gypsy sat across the table from me, a half-peeled banana, the dendritic bulb sprouting from his crumpled human thorax like fungus from the crotch of a dead oak. He wasn't moving. Nora sat beside him, still and silent. Her mouth was slightly open; she stared dumbly past me. Nora was naked—still human—and her long hair was splayed all over her face, shoulders, breasts. I touched her arm. It was cold.

From the kitchen: the whooshing and humming of the dishwashing machine, and sometimes a knock, as from badly vented plumbing; then the whole café shook. Each sound was accompanied by a change of scenery out the window. The streaks of starlight shifted angles, they grew dense or sparse, or danced in circles, or split into planes like layers of grenadine and liquor. We passed through glittering banks of sperm-like particles, auras of colored light, moments of darkness so profound they seemed to darkle the café pitch black, nullifying our fluorescents.

Tools clanked. Shaman grunted.

"Nora?" I said.

The noise in the kitchen abruptly stopped. Shaman appeared at the door. His white pants were stained with grease. He held a box-end wrench in one hand. He looked tired. "*I'm you,* you little shit."

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I slumped back into the chair.

He took a few steps in my direction, then barked, "You're not here." I was gone. It was night on the Sahara. On the fringe of my mind, fast fading, was the image of Shaman coming closer, jabbing at Izzy's bung with something like an ice pick, doing it without much spirit, as if he'd tried it a dozen times before to no effect and didn't really expect it to work now. He slapped Gypsy and Nora to see if they would respond—they didn't. Then he returned to the kitchen, to the dishwasher, in the same disgruntled, hopeless frame of mind.

"I'll have to do my own epoché," he muttered, "if this doesn't work. God help us all *then*."

Then nothing. Then sand, sound and light, Sarvaduhka and Lila Kodzi shouting up my stone ass.

29. Epoché

" 'Who am I?' Did you hear that, Lila Kodzi? The Sphinx spoke." Sarvaduhka shivered.

"It was one of the camels. Hamad snorted. He snorts, that's all."

Sarvaduhka persisted. "Oh Great One, I will convey your question to Izzy: 'Who am I?' I myself am but a poor, small person in the hospitality trade. I have two, three motels jointly with my cousins, although they hardly do anything but watch TV and drink alcoholic items. I will ask Izzy, who knows many things like that. But can you get Johnny Abilene, Wondrous One? Izzy wants to know, will you do it A.S.A. of P.? He would do this himself, but he is indisposed."

"Maybe Abu can give us a sign." Lila nudged Sarvaduhka.

"Exactly, but please be quiet, Lila. *I* am doing this . . . Great One, can you give us a sign?"

My selfhood was significantly in disarray. I was being addressed by creatures whose formation I had initiated some seven hundred million years before in an attempt to disembark from the Milky Way, where I found myself stranded. On the other hand, I was being held in a Texas highway rest stop café a good ways out in space toward the Large Magellanic Cloud. Besides which, I was some sort of tourist attraction.

Shaman wanted to eat me. I wanted to go home. Yet I couldn't find my center. To me was lost that Archimedean fulcrum from which the soul can act.

"A sign, oh Great One! Please, a sign!"

It was like trying to sit up when your back is out—Where are those muscles? My desperation drove me deeper and deeper away from my senses, deeper and deeper away from thoughts and feelings too. Sinking in, even the desperation dwindled above me like bubbles rising away from a skin diver.

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Through murk and roil, I squinted as an artist squints, bracketing the details to understand *the whole*. Fish and weed of mind tumbled by, denuded of names and relations, continually devouring one another, blurring boundaries. This wasn't the swill of Shaman's hole, for now *I* was the diver and the pearls I found would be *mine*.

But then the word "I" grew goosefeet. It *emptied*. "I" was just a mark, a convenience of thought, vacuous outside the quote marks.

The voices of Shaman—*I'm you!*—of Sarvaduhka, Lila Kodzi, the sound and light show—upbeat, mendacious—all merged in a current without source or destination. The moan of the wind, an atom bomb, nostalgia, the planet Mars, the number three, oneself, the South of France, all lines all gone!

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME.

Place went. Sequence went. Time was ungetatable. No thought to think and not a thing to think it. "I" kept diving. "I" allowed "myself" to be swallowed further until, dissolving, "I" melted into a dark, pliable mass one could only call *the bottom*. Sea creatures here, murky, inchoate, that altered as one's gaze changed, inseparable from one's gaze.

A *stirring* here, continually! Not the blank void of the mystics! Call it an urge, call it *Der Wille Zur Macht*, call it *Tao* or Pauli's Exclusion Principle, impelling the contractile world back out of its own navel:

Terms may be used
But are none of them absolute,

says Lao Tze of this foetal state.

"I" had unwittingly performed an epoché, and this was its crux. "I" had found the fulcrum. "I" was utterly free. "I" could do anything.

I broke wind.

All at once, the goosefeet fell away. *I* was there, little me and big me, as before: Mel and Abu al-Hawl, the one space-bound in a helpless stupor, the other grounded in a strange galaxy, both on account of Shaman. Yes, Shaman existed and Gypsy and Nora in the Magellanic Stream, Izzy in his lockup, Sarvaduhka and Lila Kodzi holding their noses, the camels huffing and turning away, the tourists . . . oblivious.

I had glimpsed my fulcrum. *Used* it even. I had witnessed the birth of a world *ex nihilo*, with me in the middle. Epoché. Incomprehensible! I would bide my time and wait to see what it meant.

Some things were a bit different. I was aware somehow, as information, as something casually read or heard, that Gamal Abdel Nasser was dead. (He had been alive before the epoché.) Also, the Vietnam War was still going on, with American soldiers heavily invested.

And Eugene McCarthy wasn't president. My epoché had shifted a sweaty upper lip into the Oval Office. There it had been, for a hun-

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dredth of a second, hovering above a swivel chair, just the lip, a little damp skin above it, and the barest hint of nostril. Then, due to a principle the Magellanics call "Causal Recovery," in order to preserve the causal chain locally, a human being congealed around it, complete with his past, present and future, grade school teachers, mortician, the lot: a guy name of Richard Nixon. Some other things changed as well. The American flag was now red white and *blue* (and *now*, it always had been!).

Nobody but me would know the difference, for my new universe came complete with history—retroactively—and memories in synch. Nobody, I suspected, but Izzy.

There was one other change I was immediately aware of. A guy in cowboy boots with spurs, wearing a ten-gallon hat and carrying a guitar case under his arm, was striding into the Sphinx enclosure where Sarvaduhka and Lila Kodzi grimaced: "Feh! Feh! Feh!"

"Mel?" he was saying. "Is that you, son? Is it really, truly you?"

"Gone Joe! Dad!" I said—somehow.

Somehow, he heard me. Effluvium despite, he galloped to my rock butt and embraced the cooling, rough stone, pressing into me with all his might, kissing me and weeping for joy.

30. Passport Photo

"Are you the authentic Johnny Abilene?" Lila Kodzi said. "I have all your records. I *love* your music."

Sarvaduhka was trembling, hysterically trying to piece together how Johnny Abilene had appeared on the scene. Sarvaduhka's Causal Recovery, apparently, had been incomplete. He pulled Lila violently away. "Take me back to Cairo. This is all Izzy said to do. The sound and light show is almost over, and I don't want to be caught back here when they start cleaning up. . . . It still stinks—what *was* that?"

She pushed him back. "And what about Number Three?"

Sarvaduhka slapped his head. "I forgot! The photograph. The passport photograph. Give me the Kodak."

"It's a Polaroid."

"Give me the *Kodak*."

It was a Polaroid. The epoché. Sarvaduhka blinked. He took the camera. "Wait." He sneaked around to the front of me, in among the tourists, and snapped a photo of my face and shoulders, pleated headdress and all. Then, shaking wildly, he managed to return to Lila and the horses—they were horses now, and not camels. Epoché.

He tore Lila away from Johnny Abilene, who was oblivious to her advances as he hugged me and whispered and whispered. Sarvaduhka and

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Lila were still arguing as they mounted their horses and trotted away between the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren.

31. Nora Wouldn't Understand

Johnny Abilene whispered: "Oh son, we finally made it! Guldang if you ain't one with Abu al-Hawl! I knew we could do it! I knew it! You forgive me for leaving you and your poor little mama, don't you, Mel? You must know by now that I'm no Earther. That makes you a half of what I am, son, you and Abu, half-Magellanic. I'm gonna take you back to the Clouds, where you belong. You'll come now, won't you?

"I'm sorry we can't take your mama there, boy, but she's an Earther; believe me, Mel, Nora just wouldn't understand."

In the Magellanic Stream and in the Sahara, my mind brittled like frozen tofu. "Did you say 'Nora'?"

32. Earther, You Don't Understand History

I had *thought* she looked familiar.

Johnny Abilene was astounded to discover that Nora was also a Sanduleán agent. More accurately, she was an Earther recruited by Sanduleans for the purpose of returning Abu al-Hawl to the Magellanic Clouds. The Magellanic Emperor, the same entity who, with his United Diet of the Small and Large Clouds, maneuvered the Magellanics into orbit around the Milky Way, the same who caused Sanduleak to go supernova in order to convey Johnny Abilene to Earth, this same Emperor also found Nora, via epoché, and installed her as a backup and secret watchdog over Abilene.

"In this business, you can't trust nobody," the Emperor told me much later. Only Izzy was in a position to know all the details at that time, but now, on Sandy, it's immortalized in the song, "Marriage is Just Two Alien Agents Hiding from Each Other, Anyway," Number 423 on the list, last I heard, about a billionth of a second ago.

By inseminating the Earther, effecting the commingling of the Magellanic and Milky Way branches of Abu's great family, the Emperor and my father (and, unknown to him, *Nora*) had planned to produce the Sphinx's Messiah. "Yeah, every time we tried to get through to Abu, it was 'ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN,' the Emperor told me once, over neutron *latté*. "It's enough to make a guy agnostic. So we figured we'd try a little *psychology*."

But then they didn't know how to *use* me to get through to Abu. Undercover as "Johnny Abilene," world-traveling musical goodwill ambassador,

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my father left Nora and me to look for a clue. Everywhere Johnny gigged, he buttonholed Egyptologists, astrophysicists, and Edgar Cayce fans.

Neither the Emperor, Nora, nor Johnny actually understood how to get to Abu via Mel until Shaman inadvertently showed them the way. Then it was a race to avert disaster; the Earther Shaman, after his own selfish ends, threatened to thwart the entire proceeding. The Magellanic Emperor sent Gypsy in the café ship, to help out Nora. The Emperor had, of course, first prepared the way by lining the North American throughway system with rest stop cafés that resembled the Magellanic craft, so Gypsy's café could land undetected.

And if you think that any of this is less reliable information than the Battle of Hastings or the invention of the cotton gin—which may change any moment due to epoché or political revisionism—then, Earther, you don't understand history.

Johnny Abilene was astounded. Just imagine how *I* felt. And now she was pregnant again—my mother, with *my* child. Whatever in hell "*my*" had come to mean!

33. After Nasser's Death

In the confusion following Nasser's death, Izzy was sprung, and all tours of the Giza funerary complex were put on hold. Lila Kodzi led Izzy on horseback, with Sarvaduhka, Johnny Abilene and one of the Haymakers, just arrived from the *other* Memphis via Lufthansa. Nobody stopped them. I saw them from above and from below. I felt hooves echo against the roofs of underground chambers; I saw them, tiny, remote, from millions of miles above the sky. And from inside their skins, I felt them also, not chaotically as when Shaman had pierced me, but clearly, *from a standpoint:* Abu al-Hawl's.

Izzy waved a little navy-blue book. "I got it! I got it, Melly baby. I got you a passport. We're gonna haul ass out of the Sahara." They cantered into the enclosure. "His Polaroid did it; the sun spoiled my Fuji's. Sarvaduhka's a hero. And you, you're great too, boy. You got Johnny Abilene here, and he's our main man." Izzy dismounted and held the passport photo up for the Sphinx to see.

Lila jumped down beside him and twined herself around his arm. "You lovely one-brow, you are a crazy man everywhere, just like in bed. How will you get the Great Sphinx through customs?"

My father clapped a husky arm around Sarvaduhka. Sarvaduhka was cadaverous and grim on the outside. Inside, he was set to explode. "He gets everything," —I could hear him thinking— "female action included, and my squareback thrown in, free mileage, everything. And what do I get? Saddle sore."

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"It so happens," Izzy crowed, "that if we can take him through during the hour just after sunset, the customs official lets it right by. He just thinks maybe something's kind of funny, but he can't put his finger on it, see what I mean?"

"Why do you have to move him at all," said Sarvaduhka, and he thought, ". . . you stupid, back-stabbing fornicator?"

"I'll ignore the last part, Marmaduke, but the fact is, I gotta take him into the shop. I can't finish fixing him against Shaman out here in the Sahara. My skin's too pale, okay?"

"I will not bother to ask how you expect to move a sixty-five-foot-high limestone statue across the desert, through customs, and up the gangplank onto an airplane, and convince everyone that he is simply a mid-level executive at Coca-Cola. Two hundred forty feet long, Izzy!"

"Good work," said Izzy, "you've been listening to the *Son et Lumière*. I get his peanuts and that on the airplane, don't forget. I called it at the Cairo Khan Suites."

They were gathering under my chin, where my plaited stone beard used to hang, the Pharaonic sign that shaded Tuthmosis when he dug me out of the sand. My father, Johnny Abilene, passed around his canteen; it was a scrotal second-hander from Death Valley. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, Your Majesty," he said to Izzy.

"Don't call me that," Izzy hissed, "not in front of *him*."

34. Peripherizing the Sphinx

"Okay, Johnny A.," said Izzy. "I think you know what to do."

The Haymaker produced a ukulele and started strumming backup, while Johnny tightened his bowels as if he were about to defecate. Johnny pursed his lips and squinted. The sky blinked black and then shone so brilliantly that they all had to squint and shade their eyes. There was a faint rumble from deep below.

Johnny was *peripherizing*. "I'm gonna impossibilize that gigantus right down to a midgy," he grunted. "He can walk among us like a regular man, as long as we don't look too hard, and I'm gonna fix it so's we can't, and so *nobody* can, till he gets to Izzy's shop."

Sarvaduhka was unimpressed. "What about the plane? It won't hold him."

"Anything that touches old Abu, once I've peripherized him, is gonna fall down into the same *squint* and follow along."

"Do it, cowboy," Izzy said, sweating under his pith helmet as the sun crossed over the zenith.

Johnny gave one last push, "Ee-hah!" Nothing had changed, but suddenly, everyone was looking at me differently, that is, without craning their necks! It was no longer possible to focus directly on the Sphinx; I

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was quarantined to the corner of everyone's eye, where a lot can pass, believe me, that would terrify down center. I was *as if* man-sized. Johnny patted me on my stone shoulders, gave me a kiss, they all remounted, and we headed out.

35. The Space People

came across the desert like a swarm of locusts. They were swinging "spirit catchers" over their heads, dowel-and-rubber-band doohickeys furiously buzzing.

We had left the Sphinx enclosure. Dad had given me sunglasses and a white polyester suit to wear. Izzy stuck a briefcase in my paw and hoped that the headdress would pass for a touristy gewgaw. For reasons unknown, the headdress, unlike my gigantic size, earthen complexion, missing appendages, and leonine corpus, could not be easily camouflaged. I walked in the middle, flanked by Johnny and the Haymaker, a baritone in a bolo tie, with Izzy and Lila Kodzi in front and Sarvaduhka bringing up the rear.

Dad and the baritone Haymaker had been singing:

Halfway home, boys, halfway home!
Jimmy jimmy jimson weed,
Nono nono no m-
Ore alone!
With my little bitty buckaroo baby
Sa-sa-saddled by my side,
My honey bunny sonnyboy,
Let's ride!
Halfway h . . .

And there they swarmed, Shaman's Space People, a dozen humans swathed in what looked like twisted bedsheets. They swept straight for us over the sand. Dad and the Haymaker fell silent. Izzy started beeping.

"No!" Izzy pulled out the beeper and examined it. "Three point five and rising. Damn! Shaman's trying an epoché." The air shimmered with heat waves. The Space People advanced through a mirage of shining sand that looked like the Great Salt Lake. As we continued to advance, it cleared, and behind them, suddenly, nearer than the *chotchke* market of Nazlet El-Semman, there appeared a large concession complex that had not been there a moment before, although everyone in the world except Izzy, Johnny and I—and Shaman—*remembered* its being there.

The Texas state flag hung limply from a huge pole beside it. In addition

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to the entrance at the base, there was another entry on the upper story, a pair of glass doors opening into empty space. It looked exactly like a highway rest stop café, with the overhead passenger walkway amputated.

"Lila," Izzy asked her, "how's the Vietnam War going?"

"The what?"

"The Vietnam War. This is important."

"Well, Iz, last I heard anyway, the VC were still holding onto Manhattan, Washington, and most of the American east coast, but the government in Memphis is making them fight like hell to advance inland. Why?"

36. Plan B

"And who's president? C'mon, Lila, honey, I gotta know the score before Shaman leaves the dishwasher."

"What president?" Sarvaduhka interjected. "The last president was Kennedy, in nineteen hundred and sixty-three. Since then, it's been a monarchy. Are you completely crazy, besides being a back-stabbing fornicator?"

"Well, boys," Izzy said, "better switch to Plan B. Looks like we're not gonna make it to customs before midnight—Do we still have midnights. . . ? Hey! Where's the baritone?" The Haymaker's horse was snorting nervously. Its saddle was empty. At its hooves was a dead asp with a bolo tie around its eyes.

"Dang!" Johnny said. "There goes the best Earther baritone you ever saw."

"Phooey!" Sarvaduhka spat and tramped forward, biliously abreast of Izzy. "It was stupid to bring a horse to carry that asp in the first place."

The Space People huddled about two hundred yards away. Someone had appeared against the double doors of the café. "That's Gypsy or I'm a mute coyoot," Johnny said. "I ain't seen that boy since we chain-ganged together on the Magellanic Stream." Gypsy was banging on the glass. Banging, banging. Then sliding down slowly, leaving a trail of ichor. And revealing behind him, as he fell, a tall figure dressed in white. There was a catch in Johnny's voice: "And that's gotta be Shaman."

Where's Nora? I thought—I Mel—eyes closed, swooning at the café table. *Is she okay?*

"Sure she's okay," Izzy said, down on the desert. "She's batting a thousand, kid, only *we* may not be doing so good. I don't like the way Shaman's smiling."

Johnny Abilene was unzipping his human skin. *My father!* The big hat fell down around his dendrites. The spurs and boots slid down his horse's flanks and slithered, still stuffed with feet, to the sand below. The horse, spooked, took off toward the Pyramid of Cheops, leaving Johnny hover-

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ing there for a moment before he fell to the ground, at noticeably less than 32 feet per second squared.

Lila Kodzi petitely threw up.

Sarvaduhka dismounted, ran to Izzy and fell on his knees. "Izzy, we are okay, yes? The Space People will not hurt us, yes? You have Plan B? Izzy, what *is* Plan B?"

Izzy slapped the Haymaker's mount on the rump and watched it gallop toward the Space People, followed by Sarvaduhka's horse. "Let me think a minute," he said.

37. Drunken Tarrier

"Nora?" It came out of my throat like a death rattle. "Mom?" I lifted my head from the table. My cheek was wet—I had been drooling. She was cold. She didn't move. I saw Shaman standing at the glass doors, Gypsy slumped at his feet. An acrid vapor rose from Gypsy's flesh. The color was steaming out of it, yellow to grey to black. "Nora?"

"*I'm you*," Shaman said. He was looking out into the desert, not at me. He drilled without spirit, like a drunken tarrier, never noticing how dull his bit was since my epoché. "*I'm you*"—a tired song, water on water; I'd seen my fulcrum, I'd glimpsed who I was, though I too was tired.

Shaman angled and bobbed his head, peering past his Space People at Izzy's band. "Peripherized," he muttered. "The sly dog!"

He turned toward me and lifted his chin; I knew he wanted me to come to him, to stand at his side. My body felt leaden. My pulse echoed in my skin. I had to leave Nora and go to him. He put his arm around my shoulders.

Down below, the Space People leaned toward us like heliotropes to the sun. Sarvaduhka was hugging Izzy's saddle bags. Lila covered her eyes and drew her head down between her shoulders as if she could withdraw like a turtle into its shell. The force of Shaman's thought flung Johnny Abilene into the sand; posing there before the glass, Shaman spoke to everyone—inside their own heads.

"This is my property. *He's me*. Here is my fountain, my ancient spring. *He's me*. His deep waters sired and nurtured me until I ripped out my umbilicus and dammed Abu for my own pleasure. *He's me*. Abu will remain on Earth forever. Abu—*He's me*—is *my* eternal life."

"But Shaman," I said, "I'm *not* you."

38. Officer Domingo's Conclusion

Izzy was ransacking his saddle bags, as if Plan B were in there. Lila

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had climbed down off her horse and was sitting on the ground, her head lolling against Sarvaduhka, who still knelt beside Izzy, begging him to think of something to save them. Johnny, his slimy Magellanic body glimmering on the sand, struggled to lift himself.

"I got a feeling," Izzy said as baggies of moldering Danish, maps, sun tan lotion, airline tickets, ephemerides and sen-sens flew from his saddle bags. "I got this feeling, Ducky!"

I, Abu, had lived through many things. I had seen civilizations come and go. The Space People could scythe Izzy and the others into the dunes, and I need barely notice. But I, *Mel,* was so new to this world—twenty years of it—that every flutter was still a revelation. *Oh, Izzy, come through!*

"Ah!" Izzy thrust high a travel brochure he'd picked up at the American Embassy in Cairo. Then he riffled through it till he found the paragraph he'd been looking for, the one that hadn't been there before Shaman's epoché, the one he'd sensed via Izzovision. "Look at this, Sarvaduhka."

Sarvaduhka read as Izzy held the page open before him. "So what?"

"The motel business has really dulled your brains, Duke." Izzy ran toward the Space People waving the brochure over his head. "Hey! Look at this. Hey! Did Shameface show you this?"

The Space People were leaning to see Shaman through the glass doors above. Izzy had to swing them around, one by one, bodily, to make them look at his paragraph. When they did, some gasped and seemed immediately stricken, others became angry and denied it, pushing him away, while still others started to argue with Izzy and with one another.

Above, Nora stirred. I ran to her. "Mother!"

"*I'm you!*" Shaman protested. I ignored him.

"I am but a remote descendent of your creature Chephren," Nora told me. Her face was coloring again, the eyes filling with light.

"No." I kissed her forehead. "You are the Queen of the Pontius, the land of incense ladders, my beloved consort. I never made Chephren. I have nothing to do with Chephren."

Shaman boiled. "Chephren came to me in a dream. He told me to dig you out, you ridiculous ingrate. Are you disowning Chephren?"

"It was your own epoché that changed things, Shaman," I said.

Down below, Izzy was trumpeting it for everyone's ears: "See, it says so right here, folks:

> *'Visitors to the Valley of Kings may be interested to note that, contrary to previously held theories, there is no relation between the Sphinx and Chephren. Frank Domingo, a senior forensic officer of the New York City Police Department, has concluded, after rigorous examination and analysis, that there is no actual similarity between the*

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face of the Giza Sphinx and the face on the statue of Chephren previously supposed to be its model.'

(Or vice versa.) There it is, boys and girls. Your Fearless Leader lied to you."

"I warned you, Shaman," Nora was saying. "You can't control the epoché. You're nothing now. The Sphinx never sired our race. We came up out of the mud all on our own. The Sphinx is just hitching through. You're just another human, like me."

The Space People were pelting the glass doors with rocks. With his mind, Shaman commanded them to stop—to no effect.

39. The Death of Gypsy

The ice pick with which Shaman attacked me was no less lethal for being non-physical. He hacked at Izzy's bung. Thoughts hissed from me like leaking steam; but the patch held. "You!" he screamed at me. "You laid your own mother. You want to kill yourself, *don't* you?"

"You forget I'm only half human," I said. "We Magellanics mummafug all the time, didn't you say so?"

The glass cracked and collapsed, littering jagged fragments behind Shaman. Space People chinned up and climbed through. Izzy was there, on what would have been Johnny Abilene's shoulders, were he wearing his Earther skin. The Space People grabbed Shaman's arms; Johnny grabbed his mind.

I stood by Nora, watching it all.

I stood below, on the desert, behind Lila Kodzi and Sarvaduhka, bursting out of the sunglasses and synthetic suit as the peripheralysis wore off and I was once more a gigantic monolith from the stars.

Johnny Abilene knelt beside Gypsy, his brother Sandulean. "Bodies aren't important," Gypsy gasped. Then he saw Izzy. "Your Majesty!"

The Space People were tying Shaman to the condiment stand. Izzy stroked Gypsy's wan anterior bulge. "You been bad-mouthing me, Gypsy. I can tell. Izzovision."

"Why didn't you trust me, Your Majesty? You sent me here to do a job. Then you came yourself and never let me know."

"I didn't think things would go so fast, Gyp. I had to epoché on down in a hurry when the Space People killed Shaman."

"Killed Shaman? Shaman's not dead."

"We got past and future mixed around here, old Giblet. Anyways, I'll confer with you before the whole thing ever happened—retroactively—once I get a minute."

"I hate your guts, Izzy," Gypsy said, and he kissed him, the way Mag-

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ellanics do, thwucking their nodes against each other, then expired in Izzy's arms.

Johnny shook his dendrites. "Well, my Lord, there goes the best dang Sandulean operative you ever want to see."

Izzy heaved a sigh. "When we get back to the Mags, I'll name a couple weeks after him."

"I thought you didn't want me to leave Earth. I thought you worked at Gibson's in Lockport," I said.

"Yeah, that's just part-time," Izzy said. "I'm also the Emperor of the Magellanic Clouds."

40. Beyond Oedipus

"That still don't let me out of having to be back at Gibson's 8:30 A.M. Monday morning though," Izzy said, "unless I want to be docked for the time, which I don't."

"Dualism!" cried Lila Kodzi. With Sarvaduhka, she had found a way up from the base of the rest stop café rocket ship desert concession. Sarvaduhka had become too frightened to remain in my shadow below. "Dualism! You are not both here and there, liar! If you are an Emperor, you are not a lathe setup man as you claimed to me in our conjugal bed at the Cairo Khan Suites Hotel. Izzy Molson, I abjure all past relationship with such as you."

"That suits me okay," said Izzy. "I'm working on a little something in Tonawanda, anyways, name of Fay."

"Creep!" She abruptly turned away, grabbed Sarvaduhka's jaw and kissed him passionately and long. He squealed. He stopped squealing. He kissed her back.

I stared at Nora, and the world dissolved. Let the Space People devour Shaman. Let Izzy install Johnny Abilene on the throne of the SMC and himself take up the Imperial Scepter of the combined galaxies, while punching in and out at his Lockport factory. Let Sarvaduhka have his female action, and Lila her one divine nature of Christ. Gypsy was dead, but bodies aren't important. Nasser was dead too.

"Nora . . ." I said.

"It's impossible, Mel," she said.

"Why? We'll go to Sanduleak together and live there forever, Abu al-Hawl and the Queen of Punt, Mel and Nora Bellow."

"You know it's impossible, even by epoché. You have to go back to Sandy, to release Abu, to return, to become one again on the neutron star. *You're* half-Magellanic. I'm just an Earther. And I'm pregnant."

"I love you, Nora."

"I'll raise our child, my grandchild, your sibling."

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"I won't poke my eyes out, Nora."

"I'm not asking you to. Keep them open. Keep them wide open."

"I will. . . . Hey!" The café was shaking and whipping like a flame in the wind. Izzy was beeping again. "Izzy, who's doing an epoché?"

"*I* am, Melba," Izzy said. "There's a number of things wrong here. I don't like monarchies in North America, or Vietnamese troops either, not yet; also, this rest stop belongs in Texas, and Abu—which means *you*—better haul ass back to the Magellanics right now, if I'm gonna have time to patch you permanent and still make coffee and Danish before the morning shift. Keep a tight ass now, Melly, but don't bother to buckle up. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

"Take this, son!" Johnny threw me his guitar.

The relic background radiation spiked to three point eight, then dipped to three again, and we were gone.

EPILOGUE

Izzy's epoché left Nora standing between the zucchinis and the cherry tomatoes behind the house Johnny Abilene had built her in upstate New York. Somehow, a year had passed, and her mouth was full of clothespins. She found herself hanging diapers to a yellow nylon line while she stared southwest at dusk's rosy fingers. She was in the wrong hemisphere to see the Magellanic Clouds. But I could see *her*—and Junior too, inside, in the wicker basket next to Nora's bed: *Izzovision.* ●

There's a splash across the southern sky
Named "I love you-oo!"
And I know just what a big man
Ought to do-yodelayhee-do.
I'm sorry I left you somewhere in the blue-boo-hoo-hoo
With your mama singing lullabies to baby-boo . . .
Just gimme a great big Magellanic kiss.
It's the sort of thing a daddy ought to miss.
I'm gonna bring you right back some day
Though you may be far away,
I can always pull a little stunt
That the folks call "epoché."

Take a long-lost dad's advice:
Though yore mama's Guldang nice,
*Save a little bit of love for yodelodelayhee-*me!

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

STARPLEX

by Robert J. Sawyer
Ace, $5.99

Sawyer's latest should gladden the hearts of readers who complain that nobody's writing *real science fiction* any more, the kind of story that has faster-than-light spaceships and far-off planets and interstellar combat and all the neat things they gobbled up so greedily when "Doc" Smith was dealing them out. (The complainers seem to overlook all those dozens of best-selling Star Trek books, which are chock-full of exactly the ingredients they claim to want, but that's a proposition I'll argue some other time.) Anyhow, here's a dose of the straight stuff, from a writer whose range seems to expand every time he takes on a new project. This time he's doing (in effect) Grand Space Opera, a story with plenty of slam-bang action but no shortage of material to attract thinking readers, either.

Starplex is a huge spaceship crewed by humans, dolphins, and members of two alien races—Ib and Waldahud—with whom we have formed an uneasy alliance, the Commonwealth of Planets. Interstellar travel is relatively easy, due to the discovery of *shortcuts*. Gateways that allow instantaneous interstellar travel, shortcuts are clearly artificial, but none of the Commonwealth races built them—or knows who did. One of the ship's major scientific missions is to explore newly discovered shortcuts, searching for undiscovered intelligent races.

We begin *in medias res* as Keith Lansing, commander of *Starplex* (like most of Sawyer's protagonists, a Canadian), breaks out of hyperspace in a one-man scout pod and realizes that he is nowhere near his intended destination. He has somehow discovered a new shortcut; we also learn that *Starplex* has sustained incredible damage, that the ship has made first contact with a race called darmats, and that interstellar war is likely to break out at any moment. That's all on the first page; within a few pages more, Lansing's pod is captured by a spaceship of unknown design—still another new race about to make first contact with humans.

Sawyer then jumps back in time to show how Lansing got his ship into this predicament, alternating chapters to allow both the past complications and the ongoing situation to work themselves out. Lansing's wife Rissa, one of the biologists on board *Starplex,* has be-

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gun to feel pressure because, in the course of a mid-life crisis, Lansing has begun to pay attention to a younger woman on board. There is also tension between the human and Waldahud crew members; the latter resemble six-legged pigs, blunt-spoken and abrupt by nature, and fiercely driven to accomplish some great deed so they can return home and claim breeding privileges. Their sexual arrangements, and the social consequences thereof, are complex; also they find the odor of human sweat extremely offensive, so the human crew members must shower twice a day.

Meanwhile, just as *Starplex* has uncovered a new shortcut, and found a new intelligent race, it finds itself faced with a completely unprecedented problem: the shortcut opens to let a star pass through, one whose spectral analysis seems to make it older than the entire rest of the universe. Just as they are trying to figure out this anomaly, there is a sneak attack on the ship, precipitating an unexpectedly hostile reaction by the darmats, which leads to still another crisis . . . and in the alternate part of the story line, we learn that the entire future of the universe may be in Lansing's hands, and that the secret of immortality is also within reach. In short, you'd better not blink, or you'll miss something big.

Sawyer deftly juggles half a dozen sweeping questions of cosmology (not to mention everyday ethics and morality) while keeping the story moving ahead full speed, cracking the occasional joke along the way. His scientific ideas are nicely integrated into the plot, yet they also hint at larger metaphorical levels. A very astute reader may spot an occasional scientific blooper—there aren't many, because Sawyer does his homework, and they don't matter a whole lot. And while Sawyer is not yet a brilliant stylist, few of his core audience are likely have any trouble enjoying this well-paced story. As already noted, he seems to expand his range with every new book—he could probably have built himself a very nice career without writing about anything else but intelligent dinosaurs for the next ten years, and he has elected to forego that easy path. His previous book won a Nebula, and it would not be surprising if *Starplex* were in the running for another one. Once again, if you like good ol' science fiction, here's the real thing. Enjoy.

CITY ON FIRE

by Walter Jon Williams
HarperPrism, $22.00 (hc)

This impressive new novel may confuse readers who missed Williams's *Metropolitan*, to which it is a sequel, but not because its plot depends heavily on elements laid down in the previous book. The confusion is likely to arise because the novel has the look and feel of high-tech SF, though it is in fact a fantasy. The action takes place in Caraqui, a city that feels quite contemporary, with plenty of gadgetry and hardware; but the

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motive power behind everything is in fact magic—very highly developed magic, with a sophisticated technology for its use and distribution, but on close inspection, still nothing more than hand-waving and hocus-pocus.

The magical element that powers Williams's highly urbanized world is *plasm,* and its generation and distribution is a matter of serious public concern, analogous to the generation and distribution of electrical power in our world. Quickly seizing upon the metaphorical possibilities of his world, Williams gives his protagonist—Aiah, a young woman who worked for the Plasm Authority in *Metropolitan*—an advanced education in the ways of power, both political and personal.

The story take place in the aftermath of a successful revolution, when the corrupt Keremath dynasty that ruled Caraqui was overthrown by Constantine, a charismatic aristocrat whose idealism has not deterred him from a ruthless application of *realpolitik.* He offers Aiah the directorship of a new ministry, with the mission of preventing plasm theft—the mainstay of the Silver Hand, a criminal underground loosely affiliated with the former rulers. The downside of her appointment becomes clear as soon as she moves into her new apartment in the huge government building—where a previous occupant has been killed in a spectacularly bloody fashion, most likely by magical agencies.

The nature of that agency becomes clear early on. Taikoen is a "hanged man," a former human now living out a vampiric existence by taking over the bodies of the living and destroying them in an orgy of sensual delight—the "party disease," as it is called once its effects (though not its causes) become known to the public. Constantine has struck a deal with this thoroughly evil supernatural entity, letting it feed its appetites with the bodies of minor criminals in order to have Taikoen available as a weapon against his more powerful enemies.

Aiah's new position has exposed her to other dangers, as well. Sorah, one of Constantine's former (and possibly still current) lovers, is carving out her own position of power as head of the spy agency. Sorah plays a very hard and nasty game of power politics, and is not averse to backstabbing anyone she perceives as an enemy—literally, if necessary. The new city government is an uneasy coalition including the military and the church, both of which push their own agendas. And as Aiah quickly learns, the "half-worlds" under the city harbor a large population of mutants, whom the church sees as pariahs, but who can do a great deal to facilitate her agency's mission. Casting her lot with them by making jobs in her agency available, Aiah invites unwelcome attention from the Holy Parq, the powerful head of the church.

The game Aiah has been drafted into becomes more complicated and dangerous almost at once, as

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the Silver Hand responds to her agency's pressures by moving to a neighboring country, one with little love for the revolutionaries now ruling Caraqui, and starting an opposition movement that quickly escalates into outright warfare. Aiah now has to find ways to increase the supply of plasm under wartime conditions, as well as meeting the exorbitant military demands for plasm. The domestic situation also begins to deteriorate, as moderate factions lose influence and Holy Parq begins to demand that government agencies cleanse their employment rolls of the "twisted"—i.e., the mutants. To negotiate all the perils her office has thrust upon her, Aiah has to acquire a whole new range of skills—essentially, to become a master politician.

Williams builds from this situation with great flair—telling the story in present tense, a device that in less practiced hands can be annoying. The text is interspersed with "headlines" from the news media, which often comment wittily on the ongoing action. Aiah finds new (sometimes improbable) allies, consolidates her own base of power, and emerges at the end of a complex, multi-pronged struggle as a major figure in her own right. The major enemies are, for the moment at least, defeated—largely because of Aiah's efforts. But in the process, she has lost much of her innocence. Williams is apparently at work on a third volume in the series, and it will be extremely interesting to see what he will do with this remarkable fantasy scenario. Packed with strong characters and interesting subcultures, this is some of Williams's strongest work to date.

THE STILL

by David Feintuch
Warner Aspect, $12.99

Feintuch, whose military SF series about Nicholas Seafort has rather quickly given him a very high profile, switches genres in this rather appealing fantasy, evidently the first of a series.

Feintuch has (consciously or not) taken literally the neo-classical prescription that the subject matter of epic should be "the education of a prince." And so the first-person narrator of this fantasy is in fact a prince—Rodrigo ("Roddy"), a spoiled brat of a prince who bears little resemblance to the stock sympathetic young protagonist of most by-the-numbers fantasy. In the prologue, we see him as a twelve-year-old, being taken by his mother the queen to view the vessels used in the magical rite ("the Still") that gives their house its power. When she tells him he must wait to learn their use, he throws a tantrum, and is sent off to be spanked. He spends much of the book throwing tantrums, and getting sterner and sterner punishments.

Rodrigo's real education begins at the age of sixteen, with the death of his mother, which leaves him heir apparent to the Kingdom of Caledon. Still a minor, he cannot

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take the throne in his own right. The council will insist on a regency, which means that Rodrigo will be forced to bend to the will of his uncle, Margenthar—who clearly has his own ideas about the kingship. With two younger, presumably more pliable brothers, Rodrigo cannot safely assume that time is on his side. That becomes clear almost immediately, when Margenthar decides to send Rodrigo's youngest brother off to one of his own castles to be raised—probably with the idea of putting him on the throne if Rodrigo is too difficult.

And of course, Rodrigo is difficult by nature. He is one of the most unpleasant protagonists I can recall in recent fantasy. Even his best friend Rustin, the son of a loyal vassal, sometimes has to resort to violence to get an idea through Roddy's thick skull. Feintuch puts his prince into serious enough trouble at an early stage, and lets him show enough moments of vulnerability, that he doesn't entirely lose the reader's sympathy. But there are times when it is surely nip and tuck.

Margenthar's intentions become even clearer when he places the prince under house arrest. With the help of Rustin and of their old nurse, Hester, Rodrigo and his middle brother Elryc decide to escape. Hester, a sturdy, sharp-tongued woman, owns a farmhouse in her native province, far enough away to be safe from immediate discovery. As they are about to make their break, with a stable boy and a weather-beaten soldier added to their number, a long-feared invasion force from a bordering kingdom arrives on the shores outside the castle—providing convenient cover for their escape, but creating still more problems if Rodrigo is ever to lay claim to his kingdom.

Those problems become evident almost as soon as the ill-matched group takes to the road. Rodrigo's obsession with his royal status makes him nearly useless to his fellow travelers: shirking routine camp chores, bullying the stable boy, and regularly letting his temper get the best of his judgment. Nor is he much good at winning the help of those they meet along the way. It is only after several major, humiliating setbacks that he begins to understand that a prince in exile cannot become a king simply by imposing his will on everyone around him.

Worse yet, the vessels of the Still have vanished—presumably captured by Margenthar. Rodrigo may not be able to gain access to his full royal powers even if he does succeed in gaining the throne. Rodrigo has kept himself virgin, a requirement if he is ever to use the Still—not without considerable pain. Rustin has already taken a lover: a pretty young kitchen wench who accompanies them on the journey, adding to the prince's annoyance. Now Rustin begins to sleep with the prince, giving him some measure of solace (and evidently not violating the conditions of the spell). Despite this proof of his friend's de-

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votion, Rodrigo nearly manages, through his arrogance, to lose Rustin as an ally.

But adversity is the best teacher. Rodrigo gradually begins to see that he cannot gain his throne simply by giving orders. Visiting council members (independent nobles who might be persuaded to throw their weight behind him), he begins to develop surprising skill as a diplomat and negotiator (although he still relies heavily on Rustin, who now takes the role of his advisor and confidant). Before long, Rodrigo has the beginnings of an army, and the makings of a coalition—although Rustin fears that he has negotiated away his honor. For the other prerequisite for use of the Still is absolute honesty—especially regarding an oath sworn upon The True. With all the other nobles in possession of magical powers, a king who cannot wield any power of his own is in a severely weakened posture.

Feintuch manages to keep the reader interested in this unpleasant prince—largely by giving him likable companions whose devotion to him suggests that he must have some worthwhile qualities, after all—up to the point where he begins to turn more human. And by then, Rodrigo's fortunes have begun to turn, so the rising tide of the plot carries the reader forward. And at the end of this volume, after great trials and humiliations, Rodrigo has learned a valuable lesson about his powers. The book closes with a partial victory, though larger battles remain to be fought. But this complex, unconventional fantasy is a strong recommendation for Feintuch's skill as a novelist. Readers who may have let a distaste for military SF prevent them from checking out Feintuch's work should reconsider; this is an interesting writer who isn't afraid to take risks.

IMAGINED WORLDS

by Freeman Dyson
Harvard University Press, $22.00 (hc)

Blue-sky scientific speculation, of the sort that characterized Arthur C. Clarke's seminal *Profiles of the Future* over three decades ago, is hard to come by. Scientists prefer to anchor their imaginations in reality, drawing no conclusions that observed facts and hard data will not support. When they do step beyond strict empiricism, it is usually with extreme caution and plenty of warning labels: BEWARE! WILD-EYED SPECULATION AHEAD! Rightly so—the credibility of science is already at an all-time low, thanks to tabloid reporters willing to leap on every hint of woo-woo in a sober scientist's offhand remark. So it is even more welcome to see the likes of Freeman Dyson foraying into territory usually prospected only by SF writers.

Dyson begins by lamenting the apparent loss of long-range vision by our society; it would be a rare business or government agency willing to propose a five-year plan nowadays—let alone anything that looked to the middle years of the

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next century. The next quarterly statement is apparently the limit of our willingness (if not our ability) to look ahead. Dyson decides that, since nobody else is trying it, it is even more important to look into the future, not only at the possible areas of scientific breakthrough, but at the ethical implications of breakthroughs that seem to be just over the horizon in such disciplines as genetic engineering.

He begins with the history of technology, noting that science and technology typically progress by trial and error—except when politics intrudes. Many of the great disasters of the modern era are the result of political agendas. Dyson mentions the huge dirigibles that briefly competed for mastery of the skies against airplanes; the British "Comet" jetliner that was withdrawn after a series of deadly crashes; and nuclear energy, pushed onto the market by ideologues before its true limits and capabilities had been explored. Dyson believes that a true Darwinian process—the survival of the fittest on its own terms, without artificial government support—is a far better model for technological progress than the sort of forced evolution that gave us *Hindenburg* and Chernobyl.

After these caveats, Dyson attempts to define likely future accomplishments of science and technology. Big science—which he characterizes as "Napoleonic" science—masses enormous resources under the guidance of a dictatorial leader. While it can accomplish wonders, it is only possible in eras of generous funding (whether from government or private sources). Small science, or the "Tolstoyan" approach, has more limited horizons, but can draw on many individual researchers whose efforts can add up impressively—and it doesn't need massive funding to achieve useful results. Big science is exemplified by the Manhattan Project—and by the Superconducting Supercollider, which died the instant its funding went away. The "Tolstoyan chaos" of small science prevails in microbiology and neurobiology, where a lone researcher can still produce startling results.

Dyson then lists a number of leading-edge scientific and technological projects that he thinks show promise. Several projected space missions—the Saturn explorer *Cassini*, *Neptune Orbiter*, and *Pluto Express*—head the list. The Sloan Digital Sky Survey is making use of technical breakthroughs in astronomical equipment to produce a five-color map of the entire sky, with about a million red-shift spectra of interesting objects. But the greatest innovations will almost certainly come in the biological sciences. Dyson agrees with J.B.S. Haldane's prediction that the two major frontiers of biology will be genetic engineering and ectogenesis (true "test tube" childbirth). While neither has quite become reality, they are almost certain to do so before another century is up. And their long-range ethical implications are disturbing; Dyson cites Olaf Stapledon's *Sirius*, not to

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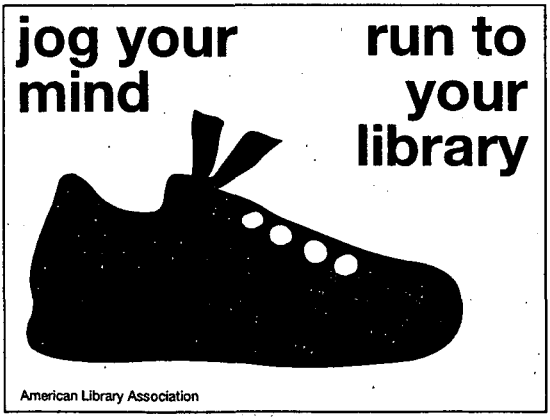
mention *Jurassic Park,* as an example of what might be around the corner for us. (His familiarity with the classics of SF is evident throughout the book.)

In a particularly audacious leap of the imagination, Dyson attempts to outline the future of the sciences in order-of-magnitude leaps. It's not hard to see trends ten years out; the blossoming of digital astronomy, the completion of the Human Genome project, and improvements in the sequencing of DNA are all probable within that time frame. At the distance of a century, we are at the limits of easy prediction. Ecological problems will probably be most effectively attacked on a local basis, while the growth of genetic engineering is likely to change the very nature of those problems. And the movement of Earth's population off-planet may at last have begun for sure. Beyond that time frame, Dyson admits that he is certain of nothing. If humanity continues to expand into space, it may diverge into many subspecies none of us now would recognize. And it may, in the process, decide to preserve good old Earth as a sort of memorial to its origins—perhaps as the last home of the unaltered "original" human race.

Dyson concludes by considering the links between the sciences and ethics, to which he offers no final answers, though he emphasizes that we do need to keep asking the hard questions. His concerns with the human consequences of scientific and technological progress make Dyson's extrapolations especially appealing in an age when distrust of science is rampant. Coupled with his remarkable depth of knowledge and his willingness to risk looking beyond the easy and obvious, they make *Imagined Worlds* a rewarding book for anyone who shares the author's concerns with the shape of the future. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Lots of European cons on tap, and some big US ones. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 1997

15-22—**SeaTrek.** For info, write: **8306 Mills Dr., Box 198, Miami FL 33183.** Or phone: **(800) 326-8735** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will start in: Los Angeles (if city omitted, same as in address) on a cruise ship to Mexico. Guests will include: Takei, Russ, B.-Dawson, Roddenberry, Campbell, deLancie, McNeill, Phillips, Wang.

15-July 26—**Clarion.** MI State U., E. Lansing MI. Butler, Bisson, Vinge, Frenkel. SF writing workshop.

23-26—**EatonCon. (909) 787-3233.** Queen Mary, Long Beach CA. Benford, Brin. SF Research Assn. annual con.

26-29—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (770) 623-6321.** Hyatt Regency. Over 10,000 expected.

27-29—**Nexus, c/o Volzer, Genfer Str. 36, Berlin 13407, Germany.** Estrel Congress Center/Hotel. A media meet.

JULY 1997

3-6—**WesterCon, Box 283, Seattle WA 98111. (206) 742-8943.** Sheraton. Straczynski, Greenberg, the Robinsons.

3-6—**AnthroCon, 207 13th St., Watervliet NY 12189.** Americana, Albany NY. Daphne Lage, David Pulver. Furries.

4-6—**PlanetFest, 65 N. Catalina Ave., Pasadena CA 91106. (818) 793-5100.** All about space exploration.

4-6—**Anime Expo, 7336 Santa Monica Blvd. #640, N. Hollywood CA 90046.** LAX Airport Hilton, Los Angeles CA.

4-6—**UFO Celebration, 105 Pepper Dr., Collegeville PA 19426. (610) 454-1197.** Roswell NM. A commercial event.

4-6—**InConJunction, Box 19776, Indianapolis IN 46219. (317) 839-5519.** Eggleton, Hitch, Dr. Demento, Henninger.

4-6—**Nexus, 26 Milner Rd., Horfield Bristol BS7 9PQ, United Kingdom.** Posthouse Forte. A media convention.

5-6—**JumpGate, 18 Watermill Rd., Raheny Dublin 5, Ireland.** Hotel Victor. Koenig, Furlan, Furst, Straczynski.

5-7—**Manche-X-ter, Box 89, Manchester M14 7GE, UK.** Hardin, Pope, Goldman, Anderson, Mera, Leigh. X-Files.

5-9—**Tulum, c/o Mazuranic, Slavonska 1, Samobor 10430, Croatia.** Announced, but not much heard recently.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 472-9944.** San Antonio TX. Budrys. WorldCon '97.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucCONeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701.** Baltimore MD. Cherryh. WorldCon '98. $110 thru Sept.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne Australia. G. Turner, Benford. WorldCon '99.

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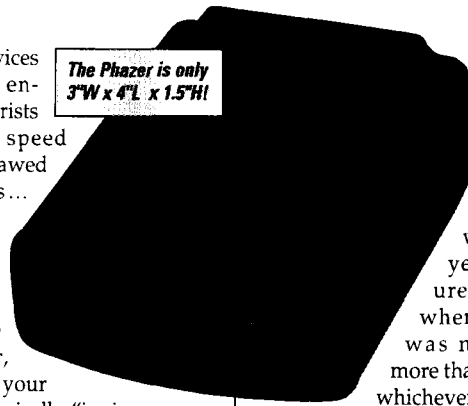

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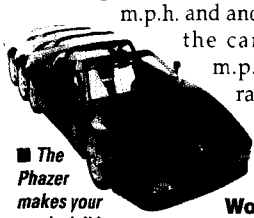

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Encourage responsible driving. The Phazer *is not* intended to condone excessive speeding. For that reason, within the first year, the manufacturer will pay tickets where the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 m.p.h., whichever is less.

Double protection. If the Phazer sounds good, but you prefer to be *notified* when you are in range of a police radar, the Phantom is for you. Ask your representative for more details!

Risk-free. Both products are backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. If you're not satisfied, return them within 90 days for a refund.

The Phazer . . . . . **$199** $14 S&H
The Phantom . . . . . **$349** $18 S&H

Please mention promotional code **1906-10899.**

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